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Special Issue:

Total Screen: Why Baudrillard, Once Again?

Edited by Katharina Niemeyer & Magali Uhl

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MAST is an online, open-access, and double-blind peer-reviewed journal featuring interdisciplinary scholarship in the domain of media studies. *MAST* stands for "Media Art Study and Theory" and aims to publish innovative research, writing, and work by artists and scholars who present new methods, approaches, questions, and researches in the field of media studies in theory and practice. The journal is relevant to academics, artists, researchers, theorists, and art curators with an interest in artistic research, theory, and praxis of media, introducing works that demonstrate creative engagements with current debates in media studies. *MAST* is housed in and sponsored by NeMLA (The Northeast Modern Language Association) at the State University of New York at Buffalo. *MAST* issues are published digitally twice a year (Spring and Fall).

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From Viral Implosions to Deserts of the Real
Introduction to the Special Issue "Total Screen: Why Baudrillard, Once Again?"

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> *There is no separation any longer, no empty space, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unhindered. You enter your life as you would walk on to a screen. You slip on your own life like a data suit.*
> (Baudrillard, *Screened Out* 177)

When we began to prepare the call for papers for this special issue, we mainly sought to recontextualize Jean Baudrillard's controversial philosophical thinking in relation to an exhibition that we have been planning with colleagues at the University of Québec in Montréal (UQAM) since 2019. *ÉCRAN TOTAL/TOTAL SCREEN*, currently featured at UQAM's Centre de design (ecrantotal.uqam.ca), initially intended to exhibit Jean Baudrillard's photographic work and philosophy in dialogue with contemporary artists aiming to critically engage with our relations to screens in a world that has already been characterized—before the pandemic—by different types of ecological and social emergencies, as well as by an overwhelming presence of digital technologies and social media platforms in our everyday lives. While some time has

passed since the publication of the previous special issue of *MAST*, what Timothy Barker (2020) eloquently stated in his introduction to "Media, Materiality, and Emergency" connects on various levels with this current special issue:

> The current global emergency brought about by the novel coronavirus pandemic now reconfigures the way vast swathes of the globe use communication media to relate to others, to remain insulated from the outside […]. It therefore seems like a good time now to start asking questions about how the materiality of media is related to the emergence of catastrophic events, both in terms of the current global pandemic, the deep structural inequalities and racism that it has exposed, but also in terms of the climate crisis and other contemporary emergencies that we are still living with. (4)

The materiality of media in relation to current emergencies is more relevant than ever; the point of departure for the research and creations featured in both this special issue of *MAST* and in the *ÉCRAN TOTAL/TOTAL SCREEN* exhibition has been almost completely overrun by the ongoing pandemic situation. At the same time, the latter ironically captures and implodes in a nutshell the main concepts Jean Baudrillard already pointed out decades ago in his visionary texts (mainly in the sixties and seventies): that the near future will be characterized by simulation, virality, implosion, and surveillance; the loss of signs and significations in the growing production of artificial meaning; and the subsequent longing for *something else*. The French philosopher, who passed away in 2007, used to be a melancholic optimist, believing in the return of singularity without ever falling into a dualistic approach of what reality could have been or might be or will never be. In this sense, his ideas may offer a link between media as materials of simulation and as materials of retaining hope for a singular 'real.' Jean Baudrillard cannot be read and understood by interpreting all of his assertions and thoughts on

a primary semiotic level or degree of signification. He turned his own writings into a seductive simulation machine that still plays with our conceptions of reality. This is a proposition one can accept and flow with, refuse from the outset, or oscillate undecidedly between approval and disapproval.

As co-editors, we find ourselves somewhere in between, oscillating between our desire to push this simulation machine even further and our inclination to interrogate what place Jean Baudrillard occupies or could occupy in media studies, visual studies, and art theory today. How does his work—as both a philosopher and a vernacular photographer—continue to influence visual artists and other forms of media art? How can we confront his radical views with feminist, intersectional, queer, postcolonial, and other critical approaches?

Provocative, eclectic, ironic, playful, and anticipatory, Baudrillard's thinking propels both the image and the medium of photography—and that which evades them—into a dimension that inspires, questions, amazes, and disturbs: thirty years after 1991, when he argued that the Gulf War never happened (Baudrillard 1995) in an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the society of the image has deviated from an already-vanished reality; and twenty years after 9/11, when he referred to the destruction of the Twin Towers on live television as a symbiotic apex between experience and its image. His conception of the image, of its forms, and of its plasticity remain resolutely contemporary (Latouche). More powerful than its own presence in a reality that it renders less real and confined to endless media feedback, the image has become an event—and the event, an image.

The philosopher's writings certainly illustrate the force of his visionary view of a society that followed his death in 2007, and whose vision has nevertheless encompassed the dominance of simulacra, transparency and hyperreality, the injunction of computer code, the

virality of communications, and the implementation of artificial intelligence—each of which are profound present-day issues that permeate his work from beginning to end. Although it refers to such events, this special issue does not wish to 'commemorate' the war in Iraq or the attacks of 9/11 even if these are the conceptual, and historical benchmarks within which the texts of this special issue unfold. Also, if Baudrillard's philosophy was supposed to be irrelevant after his death in 2007, it nevertheless persists and resurfaces in the criticism of our present time (Leonelli; Smith). Rereading his work, it is remarkable that "these texts never cease to amaze by their extraordinary 'topicality'" (Latouche 18), especially with regard to the supremacy of images in a society that has become a "total screen" (Baudrillard, *Ecran Total*).

From animated gifs of design objects to selfies taken in front of architectural works, from visual shots of drones to Instagram's 'stories' or 'snapshots' of a reinvented everyday life, to all the forms of visual recognition made possible by artificial intelligence, imagery is at the core of today's social experience (Szendy; Mirzoeff). Flowing through our lives, cutting across from one end to the other, images merge and interact with one another (Gumbrecht; Manovich). However, the behavior of images concerns their auratic force too (Alexander et al.; Marin), their capacity to reveal a social situation, a cultural prism, or a singular experience, as well as their agency as artefacts in public space (Mitchell). This raises questions both about the possibilities of our emancipation and of restriction, (self-)surveillance, and manipulation (Peraica; Alexander et al.).

In the current context of COVID-19, it seems premature to exclusively concentrate on the pandemic as a central theme of this special issue; however, it would be equally inadequate to ignore it in light of Baudrillard's systematic and sometimes debatable reflections on virality and its relationship to disaster and chaos. In fact, he perceived the individual as "the chosen

terrain for viruses and viral diseases, just as computers become the chosen terrain for electronic viruses (...) For viruses resist and proliferate as soon as they have free space" (Baudrillard, *Écran Total* 11). Moreover, it is crucial to take a critical look at the screen, which, since the early spring of 2020, has become our (almost) only communicative interface with the world: national and international news, shopping, domestic and social activities, sports and online games, as well as the consumption of fiction on various platforms, to name a few examples. This is especially relevant, considering that we invest our professional, private, and social lives in the screen, including our most intimate moments—but also, and most importantly for this special issue, our creative moments and artwork.

The following special issue can therefore be understood as a way to engage in updating or re-introducing Baudrillard's philosophy from a 'pandemic standpoint,' as well as a provocative essay collection that challenges the philosopher's ideas within the current political, social, and cultural debates. While each article may be read individually, they are also entities entangled within discourses of similar concepts or topics and that deal with specific philosophical territories of thought. This issue opens with an interdisciplinary analysis by William Merrin—media theorist and established commentator on Baudrillard—on the relevance of the philosopher's thought for understanding the issues at stake in the current digital revolution, particularly the explosion of selfies. The hyperreality which, even ten years ago, characterized the inflation of the 'real' world through material excess and endless escalation, has now been supplanted by a digital *hyporeality* in which the expansion of personal reality has become the driving force. As the self absorbs the world, the world loses its referential capacity. Merrin thus invites us to observe this reversal in identity politics and encourages us to reflect on the interment of the real—both event-driven and historical—under

the personal experience of digital documentation. The latter is also the focus of the second contribution. Interrogating the self through the prism of spiritual illusion and shifting from simulacra to simulation, Leona Nikolić addresses, through her experimental installation *Soli*, the proximity that we maintain with smartphones and the way in which bonds are woven between the self, screen interfaces, and spiritual desire. With *Soli*, the selves are placed inside one another and bear witness to the same confusion between reality and imagery that Baudrillard identified. Accentuated by today's personal devices, this confusion ultimately points each of us back to our own solitude, but also toward constant self-surveillance. The question of transparency (that of the self), already playfully apparent in Nikolić's artistic work, is brought into sharper focus with the third contribution.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point for a new urban topology, Cera Tan Ying Jing's article questions the technologies of contact-tracing and proximity-tracing and revisits the Baudrillardian concept of transparency. Reducing private life to a common code, transparency for Baudrillard concerns the flattening of behaviors and desires that become shared information. The TraceTogether technology, which the author examines in the context of Singapore (where she is conducting her research), makes it possible to visualize the hot spots of the pandemic through the movements of bodies and their interactions in urban space. If the private domain is what makes a person unique, how can we guarantee this promise in an epidemiologically transparent society, despite its embeddedness within the social contract? Can we envisage a democracy based on a measurement tool? For the author, the COVID-19 episode marks the tipping point into a world where the surveillance of bodies is the very condition of its cohesion: its biopolitics. Also situated within the international context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amanda Hill's contribution further explores the 'homely,' or, the

question of the interior—namely how hyperreality and banality have taken over people's everyday lives during quarantine by entering their homes through television. The TV series *Homemade* (2020) is presented as a case study to demonstrate the prevalence of the banal in the fictional through the remediation of the social, cultural, political, and economic realities that the various protagonists of the series encounter. Each episode is, thus, a transposition of a slice of daily life within quarantine. *Homemade* dissolves all boundaries between reality and its representation and blurs the distinction between art and the banal by exposing banality as a common and shared experience. Considering the work of Cera Tan Ying Jing and Amanda Hill in tandem, one can see how the banal not only penetrates the outside as well as the inside of our walls, but also establishes itself on our screens as an external mediator, enabling it to penetrate our privacy. In this transparency of banality, the intensity of the pandemic catastrophe becomes crystallized, just as Baudrillard had anticipated as early as 1996 (2002 for the English translation): so extreme phenomena serve, in their secret disorder, as prophylaxis-by-chaos against an extreme escalation of order and transparency. That catastrophe, the true catastrophe, does, thanks to them, remain virtual. If it did materialize, that would be the end (Baudrillard, *Screened Out* 7).

While the pandemic does not pose the same social problems as—or at least cannot be compared so easily to—an act of war or political violence, the features of the disaster run through these phenomena as a structuring matrix where fiction produces, underlines, and sustains the banality, as well as the memory of disaster itself and its imaginary alterations. The 9/11 disaster, a total catastrophe in which the image became an event and the fiction a 'reality'—similar to certain fictions concerning epidemics elsewhere—became this central *event-monument* whose imaginary and fictional productions merely trivialize the repressed

materialization in a continuous loop. Likewise, the world of fiction occupies a significant place in the sixth contribution.

Referring this time to a Marvel blockbuster that reconstructs the events of 9/11 at the moment in question, Loraine Haywood offers an analysis that intersects Baudrillard's interpretation of the destruction of the Twin Towers with its filmic mediation in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Here, the author examines how the towers have penetrated the collective imagination thanks to images, particularly cinematographic ones. According to her, the impregnation of the psyche is achieved through narration as much as through the architecture of the towers, which are understood here as objects that are 'stuck to us' (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 36) and that we cannot get rid of because they represent us. Baudrillard's thesis thus becomes prophetic: trapped within the spirit of terrorism, the Twin Towers represent the West, its economy, its culture, its commerce, and its dominance, remaining, therefore, a part of our imaginary—of our imaginary objects.

It is precisely the concept of the object that is at the center of the next three reflections, which diverge greatly in terms of epistemological perspective, but which are based on questions about the concepts of seduction and spectacle.

Shifting to the French context of the 1970s and 1980s, the following contribution proposes to consider Baudrillard's legacy as a practitioner of photography in terms of his theses on simulacra and the importance he attributed to the system of objects in which photographs are inscribed. To support her argument, Olga Smith highlights the sometimes contradictory links between the philosopher's theory and his practice, analyzing them in relation to the works of artists of his time: Sophie Calle and the duo Pierre and Gilles. What ultimately connects these three photographic practices is an assumption that real actions and media events are

intertwined with consumerist culture and the lure of spectacularization, thereby echoing theories of simulacra.

Returning to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its sanitary measures, Jeff Heydon is interested in the massively televised media incident of the use of sex dolls to fill empty seats during a Korean soccer match in May 2020. For the author, it is not so much the sexual nature of the dolls that is discussed as it is the dependence on a stable media universe whose coherence is based on the fidelity of its representations. Baudrillard, as the author notes, demonstrated that the process of duplication is a means of extracting ourselves from reality. Consequently, the fear and anxiety produced by the pandemic was addressed by a performance in which humans, replaced by synthetic artefacts, were no longer required to function.

In a departure from the dialogues of serial production and reproduction, Camille Zéhenne proposes instead to revisit Baudrillard's theory of seduction. In her video montage, she intertwines archival images, found photos, period films, and video excerpts from a famous interview with Baudrillard, playing on his pronounced taste for reversion. The artist thus abstracts herself from any epistemological hierarchy between the present sources, as well as from any domination of one episteme over another. She establishes new associations and equivalences to encourage thinking about queer and heterosexual sexualities with Baudrillard, while at the same time mocking him.

Meanwhile, Kathleen Ryan and David Guignon’s reflections and analyses confront the difficult and polemical questioning of the relationship between Baudrillard's philosophy and feminism, and moreover, the matter of transsexuality (Toffoletti). In her article, Kathleen Ryan employs simulacra to examine the historical image of a woman, Rosie, who participated in the war effort (“We Can Do It!”) and which, through contemporary reappropriations, has become a

feminist icon. The revivals of the poster, which consecrate women's empowerment, are linked to their source by the reiteration of emblematic elements of the original, but by reinterpreting the initial sign open up toward more contemporary expectations—notably those of a more inclusive intersectional feminism. As such, the use of the icon-image has a performative effect as it expands the meaning of the simulacrum.

To extend this reflection, we might ask ourselves: How can Baudrillard participate in feminist theory today? Does feminism not contradict his own theory, since it paradoxically reflects the hyperreality and simulacra that he never ceases to criticize? This is what David Guignon suggests by questioning the ambiguous relationship that the philosopher's thought has with feminist, trans, and more broadly anti-oppressive theses. By engaging with the feminist queer theorist Sara Ahmed, Guignon recognizes that it is necessary, in an anti-oppressive logic, to abandon Baudrillard, but only in a Baudrillardian sense, that is, as a response to his own project, an invitation.

To avoid unceremoniously concluding this issue, we join Levi Jackson, in the footsteps of Baudrillard's *America* (1988), in a slow journey across the desert by car. The ensuing video follows, to the letter, the philosopher's road trip, tracking down his observations which remain mostly intact as if preserved from the passage of time and the open space of the desert. Baudrillard's and Jackson's respective experiences and obsessions merge, exacerbating the fascination produced by the landscapes and inciting a mirage—that of finding in this quasi-ritual repetition the presence of the philosopher, and of these commentators, in the dust and sand that settle over their paths.

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Hyporeality, the Society of the Selfie and Identification Politics

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Abstract

This paper considers the relevance of Baudrillard's work for the contemporary era. It argues that the digital revolution that has escalated since his death in 2007 represents the extension of that productivist project he identified in western, semiotic societies: the desire to produce and realize the real. The liberation of each individual as a producer of images and content increases our stock of the real, but it has the reversive effect of proliferating and hollowing out the real, causing the mass-media age of hyperreality to reverse into the digital-age of hyporeality. It also reverses the fate of individuals and their subjectivity, as they move from being merely nodes of a network to being the center of their own, personalized media ecologies and networks. The self now absorbs the world in the society of the selfie. This is not, however, the unleashing of a real interiority but the expansion of that system of semiotic simulacral control Baudrillard had critiqued in his earliest work. This emphasis on the self and its identity can also be seen today in the rise of 'identity politics.' This paper argues that Baudrillard would have opposed this as caught within the dominant system and instead argues for the importance today, in a digital-era defined by the dominance now of 'signal value,' of an 'identification politics' that functions as the real mode of control. The model for this relationship, the paper concludes, is that of the experimental subject, wired and surveyed in its pains and pleasures.

Keywords

hyporeality, selfies, identity, identity-politics, identification, digital

Reality has barely had time to exist and already it is disappearing…
(Baudrillard, *Intelligence* 17)

The Cambrian Explosion of Realities

Looking back, we can see more-clearly the contours of the broadcast-era. In the centuries following Gutenberg's printing press, a model developed of the mass production, distribution and consumption of information. By the 20th century, this had evolved into an industrial factory-style system, encompassing print, music, radio, cinema and television, with corporations and public organizations producing vast quantities of standardized, uniform content and pushing them at consuming mass audiences. But this wasn't just about the provision of entertainment. What was being mass-produced was *reality itself*.

It was a point well understood by Jean Baudrillard. His early work on the post-war semiotic, consumer society explores how electronic mass media transform 'the lived, unique, eventual character of the world' into signs that are combined together to produce the real (*Consumer Society* 123). 'Over the whole span of daily life,' he writes, 'a vast process of simulation is taking place,' with the media assuming 'the force of reality,' obliterating the real in favor of its own model (126). Increasingly, what characterizes these simulacra for Baudrillard is their 'hyperreality'—their excessive, high-definition, pornographic technical semio-realization of the real (*Fatal Strategies* 11, 50). By the time of *Forget Foucault*, *Seduction* and *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard sees this *excess* as central to our entire system. This is a culture, he argues, devoted to 'production'—understood not as industrial manufacture, but in the original sense of 'to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: *pro-ducere*' (*Forget Foucault* 21). Hence Baudrillard's furious description of our

productive society, our 'rage … to summon everything before the jurisdiction of signs,' to make everything visible, legible, rendered, recorded and available, with everything passing over into 'the absolute evidence of the real' (*Seduction* 32, 29). Ours, he says, 'is a pornographic culture *par excellence*' (34).

Baudrillard died in March 2007, on the cusp of the take-off of 'web 2.0' and three months before the iPhone's smartphone revolution. The ongoing digital revolution has since left many of his musings on the mass media behind, but in one important aspect Baudrillard remains the key thinker of our era: because this revolution represents the expansion of that society of 'production' he describes. His 2004 book *The Intelligence of Evil* returns to the western drive for 'integral reality,' understood as 'the perpetuating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is "liberated," everything comes to fruition and has a meaning' (*Intelligence* 17). The digital revolution, therefore, constitutes the final liberation—*that of production itself*.

Because the digital revolution liberated the power of production and distribution for all, anyone with a smartphone and connection became an empowered producer of content, messages and imagery, adding to the stocks of the real. Using an array of devices and services, we devote ourselves to recording the details and minutiae of our lives in a mass *self-paparazzization* whose crowd-sourced production of the real makes the previous broadcast-era—where only a minority devoted themselves to this task—look like a decidedly amateur affair. Today, almost nothing escapes potential capture, shareability, and being added to the pornographic, hypervisible, hyperintimate collection of the museum of the real.

A key McLuhanist idea taken up by Baudrillard is 'reversal,' where at the 'peak of performance,' technologies and processes reverse their effects (McLuhan 30, 33, 182). Hence if, in the broadcast-era, the *media materiel* worked to build the stocks of the real, then digital production has the opposite effect. As in the economic law of over-production leading to devaluation, our digital creativity erodes the reality principle itself. As Baudrillard suggests, 'it is the excess of reality which stops us believing in it … the real is suffocated by its own accumulation' (*Intelligence* 19). Our digital hyperproduction, therefore, reverses now into *the crash of the real*. We move from the broadcast era of hyperreality, where huge quantities of material were mobilized to perfect the real, to the digital world of *hyporeality*, where the personal reality is hyperinflated and the real as a shared experience hyperdeflates. This hyporeality ('hypo', meaning 'under' or 'less') is characterized by decline or loss: for when the real is reduced to the self and its productions, then little or nothing is required either to create or believe in it.

Recent fears over 'fake news,' disinformation, Russian propaganda and conspiracy theories have seen a growing discourse around the notion of a 'post-truth' society, with the collapse of belief in the mainstream media leading to fears for 'truth,' for democracy and for political debate itself. One explanation for this 'crisis' is Pariser's claim that we're split today into personal 'filter bubbles,' where personally-chosen networks and information and algorithmically-fed feeds remove us from a plurality of sources and a shared experience of the world. This argument has value, but it fails to recognize that the entire, previous era of broadcast media was itself a 'bubble'—a 'mainstream bubble,' encompassing the entirety of the population and filtering collectively not individually, by market demographics,

professional codes of conduct, government regulation and advertiser good-will, ensuring nothing too extreme or offensive appeared.

Our world of individual bubbles, therefore, is the result of the digital bursting of the mainstream bubble and its mass-filtered *mass-consensual reality*. Digital technologies have exploded our informational sources into the fractal fragments of everything we can see or find—every friend, follower, message, link, webpage, forum, comment, personal, direct or group message, every gif and meme, photograph, video, update, 'like' or 'story' and into anything one can think or do or explore and enjoy, however far outside the mainstream. But this isn't simply about individual bubbles, but rather the *foam* of individual bubbles—as Sloterdijk suggests of 'foam cities,' we are not dealing with 'mere agglomerations of adjacent (separation-sharing) inert and solid bodies,' but rather with 'multiplicities of loosely-touching lifeworldly cells,' each of which 'possesses the dignity of a universe' (Sloterdijk 565). This foam represents, therefore, a foam of personally-created life worlds: *a Cambrian explosion of realities*. Far from being post-truth, there has never been as much—or rather *so many* truths. At the core of this proliferation of realities is the hyper-empowered, hyper-productive digital self.

The Panic-stricken Production of the Self

Baudrillard's 1987 essay 'The Ecstasy of Communication' presents a grim image of broadcast-era subjectivity, in describing the condition of the connected individual—the dystopian abolition of all private space and interiority, the over-exposure to the world's 'obscenity,' the subject's inability to separate themselves from and their subsequent absorption into the communication network itself. 'The schizophrenic,' he says, 'cannot produce the limits of his very being, he can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks' (*Ecstasy* 27). The digital

revolution, however, has effected a Ptolemaic reversal of this condition, liberating the subject as *the center* of the media, reality and truth.

Because the digital is the world of '*me*-dia': a world revolving around ourselves, around *our* technological management, *our* lives, relationships, opinions and meanings (Merrin 77-92). So today the 'panic-stricken production of the real' Baudrillard warned of (*Simulacra* 7), finds expression in *the panic-stricken production of the self*. We move from the professionally-crafted, tightly-controlled and limited channels of the broadcast world to the digital-cockpit of ourselves and our devices, where we control what we consume and how and when and produce and push-on our own output to a global audience.

Hence, instead of a twitching node overwhelmed by the network, the self reverses to overwhelm the world. So, today, it is the world that can no longer produce the limits of *its* being, being reduced in turn to 'a pure absorption and resorption surface' of the self. Baudrillard's later theory of 'virtuality' and his critique of Debord's 'society of the spectacle' with his later claim that 'We are no longer spectators but actors in the performance' (*Perfect Crime* 27) already suggest this, but even he couldn't foresee the extent of the reversal that has placed the performative self as central to all reality and meaning. This is now *the society of the selfie*. Consider 'Princess Breanna''s 2014 tweet 'Selfie in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp' (Zarrell). Her smiling face fills the image, pushing the actual buildings and their historical reality out of the scene. To paraphrase Baudrillard, the Holocaust here *cannot take (a) place*—pushed out by the self's grinning evidence of its presence. Hence our new, more-dangerous form of denialism: not the exculpatory denialism of Holocaust revisionists desperate to disprove the event, but the replacement of the historical event and its reality *with ourselves*

and our experiences and feelings. If, for Adorno, to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, what would Baudrillard say of Princess Breanna's happy-face emoji?

It's not hard to speculate, for Baudrillard was, in retrospect, a key theorist of identity. The roots of this are found in *The System of Objects*, which describes the passage from the world of 'symbolic exchange' to one of semiotic consumption. For Baudrillard, western societies are built on a process of semioticisation—the transformation of the object and all relations, history, culture and communication into an organized system of signs under 'the code,' to be combined and consumed in their difference (*System* 199-205). Signs originate with the abolition of the real relationships and experiences of the 'symbolic,' reducing it to semiotic elements which derive their meaning now from their 'abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign objects' (200). The defining historical characteristic of western societies, therefore, is the abolition and semiotic replacement of the symbolic and the reorientation of all relations as relations of consumption: relations with and between signs.

In the great intellectual conflict between theories of structure and agency, Baudrillard stands firmly in the former camp. His theory of media and consumer society combines a McLuhanist concept of form and its effects, Boorstin and Debord's epistemological critique, and a Marcusian critique of social programming, integration and control, with Barthes' structuralist ideas of an ideological system of communication and Veblen's insights into social hierarchy and the use of goods for competitive distinction. Everything here points to *the systemic production of the individual*. The semiotic, consumer society represents, therefore, not a realm of freedom, sovereignty and personal expression but the opposite: our socialization in and training into the code (*Consumer Society* 81)—our semiotic 'personalisation' and production (87-98) as part of the 'total organisation of everyday life' (29).

This systemic production and personalisation, however, appears precisely as the expression of individual freedom. Baudrillard's best example, in *The System of Objects*, is of the development of interior design from the 'traditional environment' of 'the Bourgeois interior,' which personifies its complex, affective, familial and social relationships in its 'presence' and 'social dignity,' to the modern, designed interior. The latter liberates the object as a mobile, weightless sign to be manipulated by their user (*System* 15-19) and thus frees the user too from symbolic bonds to express their personal choices. We become, here, the 'active engineer of atmosphere' (26), revelling in our freedom and control. The semiotic self-expression that appears to define and celebrate our individuality, therefore, actually represents the reduction of ourselves to semiotic communication and our enslavement to its 'code.'

The same prescient critique is found in Baudrillard's discussion of the body, fashion and sexuality (*Consumer Society* 129-50; *Symbolic Exchange* 87-100; 101-24; *Seduction*). Here again, all of these are divested of symbolic meaning, with the body, for example, being abstracted as an object requiring constant semiotic labor 'to smooth it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world' (*Consumer Society* 131). In its management for personalisation, distinction and prestige, therefore, the body is systemically integrated as 'the finest consumer object' (131). This is a critique we could easily generalize to our contemporary social media presentation and the whole of influencer culture. Today, we have all become the active engineers of our online, semiotic selves, convinced of our freedom, originality, and individuality.

This critique of identity may be one of the most important aspects of Baudrillard's work today. Whereas in 1970 the private engineering of semiotic objects remained limited, today the entire realm of the interior—encompassing also our bedrooms, bodies, private lives,

experiences and thoughts—overwhelms the world as we dedicate ourselves to an endless, potentially global self-coverage. Today, Berkeley's *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived—offers not a transcendental but a terrestrial reassurance: with our existence confirmed now by the number of likes, comments, retweets and reposts. The post without engagement is a dead moment that strikes to the core of the self.

Far from being the stable base of a true, core 'interior,' therefore, this semiotic simulacrum's lack of foundations means it requires continual management and reproduction; a labor producing doubt and anxiety, as seen in the November 2015 online meltdown of *Australia's Next Top Model* contestant Cassi Van Den Dungen. Outraged that only 14 of her followers had liked her Instagram post 'Say yes to new adventures,' she lashed out at all those who hadn't: 'This, to me, either means that people A) don't like me having new adventures, as if I'm not allowed fun, or B) it means people don't like new adventures.' Her conclusion was histrionic: 'Either way, all I have to say to those people who didn't like my post and don't like having fun is YOU ALL SUCK!' (Saul). The same month Essena O'Neil, a teenager with 612,000 followers, declared she was leaving Instagram, deleting 2,000 posts 'that served no real purpose other than self-promotion,' leaving comments that exposed the simulacral strategies of the remaining posts and saying she'd focus from now on 'real-life projects' (Hunt).

In her 1995 book *Life on the Screen,* Sherry Turkle had lauded the positive possibilities opened up by the internet for a postmodern, performative, flexible and multiple self, able to play endlessly with its identity (*Life on the Screen* 177-269). By 2011's *Alone Together*, however, her feelings had changed. As she said in an interview, adolescents today 'get a kind of performance anxiety' and 'performance exhaustion' as they're constantly on. They don't

allow themselves to get off their accounts: 'They don't have a place to go where they're not performing themselves and that becomes a problem' (Mainwaring).

A similar critique is found in Byung Chul-Han's Baudrillardian attack on the digital Neo-liberal self—understood now not as 'subjects' but as unending personal 'projects', 'always fashioning and reinventing themselves' (*Psychopolitics* 1). In our new 'achievement society' (*Burnout* 8), Han argues each of us becomes 'the entrepreneur of its own self' (*Psychopolitics* 2), committed to their own 'unlimited self-production' (6). The Neo-liberal semio-economy puts individuals into 'absolute competition' with themselves (*Burnout* 46), leading to 'self-exploitation' and 'self-destruction' (47). Hence, Han explains, the pathologies we face today are not those of industrial risk and alienation but the new 'systemic' pathologies of depression, ADHD and 'burnout' (7). And all the time, this hyper-self-productive, self-destroying individual 'considers itself free' (47).

This overwhelming of the world by the subject—by the pornographic production of the self—is matched today by the overwhelming of politics by the self and its 'identity.'

From Identity Politics to *Identification* Politics

Baudrillard was always a theorist of identity, of how, under the guise of their 'liberation' and expression, individuals were structured, produced and integrated into the dominant system. His conclusion that semiotic identity is a mode of simulation and social control appears at odds, however, with an age where digital developments seem overwhelmingly positive, in allowing the discovery of oneself, the exhibition of one's personality and individuality, the validation of one's identity, the shared exploration of traditionally repressed or devalued characteristics—sexuality, ethnicity, gender, body-shape—and new modes of community, connection and

activism. Baudrillard, however, would disagree with this, just as he'd question too the politics that have arisen around the self and its identity.

Whilst today's 'identity politics' aren't new, the centrality of identitarianism to our contemporary political life is undoubtedly linked to the digital liberation of the self and its online expression. Most commentators trace the roots of today's identity politics to the late 1960s counterculture, out of which emerged new 'liberation' movements including 'black pride' and 'black power,' 'women's liberation,' and 'gay pride' and 'gay liberation' (Hartman 9-37). Each was a response, in part, to the failure of mainstream (and especially left-wing) politics to incorporate their concerns and their subsequent success owed much to the left's decline in the 1970s-80s. As political culture moved to the right, as class-based analyses fell out of favor and as the left moved to the center, accepting the Neo-liberal consensus, identitarianism was left as almost the only flourishing, radical alternative. The term 'identity politics' was coined by the African-American lesbian feminist group the 'Combahee River Collective' in 1977, to promote consciousness raising and self-liberation among identity groups (Sparrow 127-8) and, in the decades since, each movement has fought for and made substantial gains in human and civil rights in its name. The internet, especially, has helped enhance awareness and organization, aiding ongoing transformative protests such as the #Blacklivesmatter and #Metoo movements.

The success of left-wing identity politics, especially on campus (Furedi, *What's Happened*), led to a backlash from right-wing commentators and academics and a series of 'culture wars' playing out throughout the 1990s (Nagle 54-67). The 1980s-90s saw the rise of radio 'shock-jocks,' evangelical Christianity, a reaction against 'political correctness,' the 'patriot' movement and the take-off of Neo-Nazi and white supremacist online networks

(Belew; Neiwert). Obama's election in 2008 reinvigorated the right, leading to the 'Tea Party' movement and a revived militia movement. The renewed 'culture wars' became explicit with 2014's #Gamergate, which focused attention on the 'alt-right' and the online nexus of white nationalism, Neo-Nazism, the internet culture of 4Chan and Reddit, the incel and men's movements and conspiracy theorism (Hawley; Marantz; Nagle; Neiwert; Wendling). Trump's election allowed these movements to enter mainstream culture, leading to increased polarization and violence, such as at Charlottesville in August 2017 and in the 2020 BLM protests. Central to the right-wing response, therefore, was *an assertion of their own identities*. US and European right-wing politics have been overwhelmed by an identitarianism that, in its focus on whiteness, Maleness, European heritage and culture, is *an exact mirror of the left*, promoting the same assertion of value (one's core identity), the same defensiveness (to protect its culture), the same power (deeply-felt identification and emotion) and the same response (to assert the self's identity against all threats).

By 2020, therefore, it seemed as if the western, liberal-democratic ideal of reasoned debate was being overwhelmed by the politics of the self: by the implacable oppositions of identity, the impossibility of debating another's self-truth and the righteousness of personal feeling and offence. Central to this cultural war was the screen and the *foam* of 'me-dia', with the politics of the self played out through the personally-crafted hyporeal life-worlds and their barrage of evidence, links, tweets, memes, stories and photos. We might place our hopes in commonality and intersectionality, but this traditional expansive politics struggles against the implosive force of identitarianism which resolves every event back to the self and its identity. Here any other identity appears as a block to our own and a personal threat. The irreducible *core of the self* irradiates all politics.

Identitarianism is about the elevation of the self to the highest 'superlative power' (Baudrillard, *Fatal* 9): *the selfer than self*. Baudrillard quotes Marie Duval: 'I'm not beautiful, I'm worse,' suggesting the paradoxical terror of beauty when raised to a higher power (*Fatal* 9), but perhaps a better example is found in the film of *The Lord of the Rings*: when offered power, the elf Galadriel rises up as a spectral god, announcing that, '[i]n place of a Dark Lord, you would have a queen! Not dark, but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Treacherous as the sea! Stronger than the foundations of the earth! All shall love me, and despair!' (TheLotrTV). In the age of the hyporeal self, we are all Galadriel: the self rises, beautiful and terrible, demanding that all shall love it.

Baudrillard had anticipated this identitarian mirroring. His 1990 essay 'The Melodrama of Difference' presents a semiotic, post-structuralist analysis of racial politics, in a reflection on the replacement of 'otherness' today with a world of 'differences.' In contrast to the symbolic form of otherness, where there are only 'destinies'—or 'mutually reinforcing aspects of an immutable order, parts of a reversible cycle' (*Transparency* 127), the semiotic world of differences is one of 'regulated exchange' (128). Radical, violent otherness, therefore, has been integrated today into the western, universalist system of differences, as a sign exchanging among others. Hence Baudrillard's claim that racism only exists when otherness is abolished and 'the other becomes merely different, that is to say, dangerously similar' (129). Racism, therefore, is the product of a system of differences, seizing on 'the very slightest variations on the order of signs,' quickly taking on 'a viral and automatic character,' perpetuating itself 'while reveling in a generalized semiotics' (130).

Baudrillard's analysis is overly simple, but the underlying point is important: all identitarian categories exist in the same system, in relationship with each other. Hence

Baudrillard's denial that any solution can be found within that system: any 'humanism of difference' or 'moral or political philosophy of difference' (130) would only perpetuate the exchange (131). Thus, what appears to be a conflict against an existing system is revealed to be an internal exchange. Hence identitarianism produces its identical opposition, with the same semio-logic, the same activism and even the same violence (as the shooting of antifa/BLM in Kenosha was followed by the shooting of a white nationalist in Portland).

Baudrillard makes a similar point in another 1990 essay, 'Transsexuality.' Early in *The Transparency of Evil,* he describes the 'transversal' forms of this society of productive 'liberation' which, he says, include 'transpolitics,' 'transaesthetics,' 'transeconomics' and 'transsexuality' (*Transparency* 7). Baudrillard uses the term 'transsexuality' here in several ways but ultimately relies on body surgery as a metaphor for the entire realm of sexuality, so today, instead of 'surgery' we employ 'semio-urgy': an endless, post-structuralist 'playing with the commutability of the signs of sex' (20). Hence, he explains, about the liberation of sex as a play of signs, 'we are all transsexuals' (21): 'the rule of transvestitism has become the very basis of our behaviour' (23). His choice of language obviously offends contemporary sensibilities, but the underlying point is identical to Judith Butler's in her book *Gender Trouble*, published the same year (though where Baudrillard is implacably critical, Butler celebrates this process). Butler begins by removing any claims to a referential real of 'woman' or the 'body,' repeating Derrida's poststructuralist critique of a 'metaphysics of substance,' and using Foucault to demonstrate their production through the system of power (*Gender Trouble* 1-46) before defending 'gender' as an empowering, semiotic 'performative' act (34, 185, 190).

That poststructuralist conception of identity as semio-performance was hugely influential in identitarian circles, in suggesting the liberative power of self-creation, but it has also proven controversial and in tension with the constant need to reassert a real behind identity, whether in the transgender bodily experience, the sexual body for UK 'gender critical feminists,' or the body as a targeted site of violence in the #Metoo and #Blacklivesmatter movements. Baudrillard would resist both this semio-performativity and bodily real, placing his critical hopes instead in the 'symbolic' and its many forms, hence in *The Transparency of Evil* his repeated defence of 'radical otherness' (138) and 'radical exoticism' (146-55). But there are problems here, as his appeal to the non-western is not the radical 'de-colonialization' it may first appear, in depending entirely on a Durkheimian social-anthropological and philosophical tradition which remains a very white, male, western-derived image of the other. It was a point Lyotard made as early as 1974, when he charged that tradition as belonging 'in its entirety to western racism and imperialism' and Baudrillard with inheriting and utilizing the concept of the 'good savage' (Lyotard 106).

But Lyotard too quickly dismisses Baudrillard, a thinker whose work retains its radicality and value. One of his most important contributions was fusing (structuralist and post-structuralist) semiotics with political economy in an expanded 'general political economy' (*For a Critique* 128). The industrial-era logics of 'use value' and 'exchange value' had been extended and transformed, he argued, by the elevation of the commodity to a 'sign' and the subsequent domination of 'sign-value' (*For a Critique* 143-64), hence industrial capitalism gave way to a new, expanded mode of semio-capitalism. Today, following his lead, we can develop this further. With the digital revolution, we have seen the emergence of a higher systemic form, based upon a new, higher 'logic'—that of *signal value*. We pass from the

political economy of the sign to *the political economy of the signal*. Digitality has transformed capitalism, allowing new modes of exploitation based upon digital activity, and in particular, upon the ongoing, continuous, real-time transmission of information and activity—of digital signals—which pour from every individual and connected device, creating what scholars have come to call 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff).

It took broadband, public and domestic WFI, the Web 2.0 revolution and the post-2007 smart-phone revolution to turn digital signals into a near continuous, personally connected stream, and recent developments are moving towards a total capture of life. Today our private spaces have become recording and signaling environments, with the penetration of the home of 'smart' devices, and AI home assistants and cameras: 'wearables' capture our intimate bodily data and rhythms, while outside the home the 'Internet of Things' connects cars, streets, and all public spaces through sensors, computers and cameras. There is little, in theory, that can escape capture: experiments in implants and brain-computer interfaces promise a whole new frontier, with China, for example, already using EEG 'mind-reading' helmets on key workers (Fullerton).

But this is about more than capture: the aim is analysis and identification, hence the take-off of digital biometrics, using the voice, face, iris etc. or other identificatory characteristics such as gait or keystroke pattern. Linked with other systems such as databases, Big Data analysis, CCTVs and drones, we see a vast, emerging, connected complex of AI-powered oversight. The US and UK's aim of 'total information awareness' (Horgan) was exposed by Snowden, but others are more open about their surveillance, as seen in the Chinese treatment of the Uighurs (Wall Street Journal, Byler), their 'social-credit' system and use of facial recognition (Mistreanu; Dudley). These surveillance systems were expanded in response

to Covid-19, which, in imploding the office and home, also expanded accessibility, opening all private spaces to digital transparency (Klein). What this exposes is the movement of all political systems today to totalitarianism.

We remain too bewitched by 20th-century totalitarianism distracted by the uniforms, the spectacle, the symbolism, the public terror, the hyper-visible, aesthetically organised regimes that tried to abolish the separation of public and private life to achieve Mussolini's dream of 'totalitario': 'All within the state, nothing outside the state, none against the state' (Conquest 249). Now, at a historical distance, we can see the essence of totalitarianism is actually *the informational claim* to penetrate and oversee every aspect of private life. Today's totalitarianism fulfils itself as an ideal of digital transparency, employed across all political systems (including western liberal democracy). Freed from political theatrics, the burden of terror, and the cost of costumery, it reverses from spectacle to secrecy and from public to private, as a project aiming at the oversight, monitoring, capture and evaluation of every aspect of personal interiority. Baudrillard described the 'code' of signification as 'totalitarian,' but the digital code—*the pornography of the signal*—comes closer to its realization.

Hence sign-value is eclipsed today by signal-value, and the entire psychodrama of semiology and identity is superseded by non-human processes of capture and algorithmic processing. Identity, therefore, is less important today than *identification* and the cold, hidden *identification-politics* produced by this totalitarian digital regime is more important than our hot, public, identity-politics. It is through identification today—whether precise, personal detection, or the broader processes of sorting and categorization within identified populations—that we are controlled. The digital avatar—made in the moment and continually reconfigured through new signals (Cheney-Lippold)—becomes the basis for decision-

making—for financial and employment decisions, for predictive policing, for commercial and political targeting, for our possession and enjoyment of civil rights, and for the possibility of state oppression. With the US DoD's 'Project Maven,' with its AI analysis of drone imagery for targeting, and the new 'Agile Condor' drone-pod which allows real-time, in-flight AI analysis of data (Fang, Trevithick), identification may even determine our right to life itself.

So, today, the entire realm of semiology and humanly-created and interpreted imagery is in the process of being surpassed by machine-reading and the interpretation of invisible signals, whose decisions impact our lives and control our behaviors. In this *post-semiological* era, therefore, we can look back at *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society* with nostalgia, at the quaint era, now gone, when humans and their meaning mattered.

The Experimental Subject

In his 1978 book *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, Baudrillard describes the 'black hole' of the masses, who were forced to speak through polls and representations and who acted as an 'earth,' an 'inertia' and an 'implosive' force upon all media meaning. Today this too has reversed: the digital masses *do nothing but speak*. The masses are no longer silent, leading us, in the spirit of Baudrillard, to three possible hypotheses.

1. The productivist assumption: the masses speak and it is good. It is a positive, productive phenomenon, uncovering and asserting the real, interior meaning and identity of each individual.
2. The Baudrillardian assertion: the masses' speech is merely an extension and expansion of the system of simulacra and its controls. Its expansion of the real leads, in its reversal, to our world of hyporeality.

3. The higher level realisation: beneath the speech of the masses there is its real speech: the mass of signals. This is a new, experimental, *signal capitalism*—experimental not just because it is new and its implications have yet to be seen, but also because its model is *the experimental animal*.

This is no longer the relationship of pollster and polled (*In the Shadow* 20), but of experimenter and 'subject': though, crucially, not that subject which we believe in and valorise—that self-groomed subject overflowing with identity, reality and unique value—but the experimental subject—a wired animal, sending continuous signals to their connected interlocutors, tortured and experimented on by the technology companies, advertisers and political campaigners (just like Cambridge Analytica experimented on their targets with different types of ad), all read symptomatically on the screen in real-time through the electronic pulses of their physiological and psycho-responses. Hence the 'silent majority' is replaced here by *the screaming majority*: both the masses' real-time, ubiquitous speech that overwhelms the world with itself and the silent electronic screams of the signals.

Instead, therefore, of the digital liberation of production leading to the realization of the self and its identity, it represents instead an expansion of the simulacral system of control and the transformation of the system through the higher level logic of signal-value, which allows a new mode of identification politics based upon the harvesting of signals from the liberated, wired, experimental subject which is tortured for its likes, its comments and its selfies.

This is a profoundly negative, critical, near-dystopian interpretation of our world. But who could doubt that Baudrillard would agree with it?

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Exploring Hyperreal Transcendence through Research-creation: The Smartphone as Spiritual Interface between the Real and Virtual Selves

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Had Jean Baudrillard lived to see the year 2021—or even the last decade for that matter—he certainly would not have been surprised by the state of things. Decades ago, he had seen it all coming. From the dissolution of truth and veritable reality itself (*Screened Out* 85) to the economic transition from industrial capitalism to data capitalism (*L'Échange symbolique* 9) to the internet's destabilization of individual identity and social relations (*Screened Out* 57-58), he had prophesied our contemporary condition with an uncanny precision. What he could not have foretold, however, was how, exactly, this would all materialize. How could he have known that all human experience and any remaining traces of the real Self would soon become distilled into a shimmering, pocket-sized, omnipotent computer from which we would all become almost literally inseparable?

While the mortal limits of Baudrillard's prescience may not have granted him explicit visions of the smartphone as the technology that would ultimately possess humanity, he was acutely aware of the hypnotic power of techno-screens and their hyperactive images (*Evil Demon* 22), of the supernatural seduction of reality-defying computers and their infinite

interfaces (*Transparence* 54), of our ambivalent and relentless relationships with digital media and technologies (*Screened Out* 180), and of our uncontrollable freefall from intelligible reality into the multidimensional absurdity of virtuality (*Ecstasy* 22). Our contemporary experience with the smartphone—a remarkably mundane yet transcendent personal device that is possibly the most spiritual object of our time—precisely epitomizes some of Baudrillard's most potent philosophical reflections regarding the concepts of reality, virtuality, and hyperreality.

Such reflections are fundamental to my research-creation work in the fields of new media studies and experimental media practice, particularly in a recent immersive installation entitled *Soli*. Addressing the spiritual significance of our intimacy with smartphones in relation to both our perception and our consumption of our Selves and of our worlds across these personal devices, *Soli* derives substantial theoretical inspiration from Baudrillard's innovative thinking. Designed as a 'digital meditation experience,' my intention with *Soli* is to interrogate the ways in which we understand the intricate relationships between our Selves, our digital technologies, and our belief systems. Inspired by the recent emergence and mainstream popularity of smartphone applications for New Age spiritual practices such as meditation, astrology, and divination, I became increasingly fascinated by not only the commodification of spirituality through digital media, but also by the innate spiritual nature of digital technologies. Such spiritual smartphone applications are consumed by millions of users and include, for example, *Co-Star* and *Sanctuary*, which provide personalized astrological natal charts and daily horoscopes; *Calm* and *Headspace*, which offer a vast selection of guided meditations and send customised notifications to prompt mindful behaviour; and *Moonly*, which equips users with spiritual wisdom regarding moon cycles, ancient runes, tarot cards, and a host of other metaphysical traditions. This phenomenon of trendy spiritual smartphone applications serves

as a point of departure for examining the greater transcendental experience of engaging with one's smartphone. Thus, this notion of techno-spiritual transcendence may ultimately be positioned as analogous to Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal in its obfuscation of the boundaries between physical and psychological bodies, material and immaterial worlds, and actuality and illusion. Through a subversive exploration of our pathological captivation with our smartphones, *Soli* offers curious technophilic and technophobic users alike a means by which to confront the intrinsic entanglements between spirituality and technology.

Fig. 1. User entering *Soli* structure, April 2021, photo by Leona Nikolić

Conceptually situating the smartphone and its user as a single, inseparable entity, *Soli* deliberately attempts to mystify any distinction between the Self and the digital device. Upon online registration and acceptance of some rather nebulous terms and conditions, the digital meditation experience begins with a seven-minute guided meditation encountered in solitude

by the user within an ethereally luminous tent-like structure. Once seated inside, the user is instructed to connect their smartphone to *Soli*'s system with a provided cable and prompted to interact with their device in both absurd and ordinary manners—by massaging the device while visualizing a glowing stream of light emanate from it toward the forehead, by attempting calming breathing exercises while scrolling social media news feeds, or by simply checking emails and reflecting on past sent messages for example.

Following this ritualistic meditation, the installation reveals the user's 'digital aura.' Based on the seven chakras (energetic centers of the body originating in Hinduism, but prevalent in New Age spiritual discourse) and their corresponding colors, this aura takes the form of a colored light that floods the entire tent and an accompanying vocal description which refers to the user's supposed relationship with their phone. While purportedly determined by the collection and analysis of the user's personal data, this aura is, in fact, randomly generated since no such data collection actually takes place. During the revelation of the aura, the user is encouraged to take an 'aura selfie' against the chromatic backdrop and, upon exiting the installation, is offered the possibility to instantly transubstantiate this immaterial digital snapshot into a material photograph—a talisman symbolizing the liminal interface between the real and the virtual (*Screened Out* 177-178), between Self and smartphone. This auratic interface, defined by Baudrillard (*Simulacres* 10; *L'Échange symbolique* 112) as the 'hyperreal,' sits as a magical threshold between worlds, obscuring not only our relationship with reality, but also with our real Selves.

Fig. 2. *Soli* interior with user, April 2021, photo by Kevin Calero

Fig. 3. User during *Soli*'s guided meditation, April 2021, photo by Kevin Calero

Here, the user's aura does not function merely as a ludic image of the Self in conceptual terms; this aura represents the experience of seeing oneself through media, of seeing oneself reproduced in media, and of seeing oneself as seen by media. This illusory aura is less akin to a reflection one sees in the mirror, corresponding, rather, to the refraction of the Self across algorithmic encounter.

Fig. 4. User and smartphone, April 2021, photo by Leona Nikolić

Through the existential mystification of hyperreality that occurs in the revelation of this aura, the user is rendered "a pure screen, a pure absorption and re-absorption surface of the influent networks" (*Ecstasy* 27), suggesting that media technologies such as smartphones and spiritual smartphone applications are not so much extensions of us as we are vessels for their viral obliteration of reality. *Soli* reproduces this contemporary condition by hyperbolizing the

illusory and spectacular experience of the techno-commodification of the Self through our ambivalent co-dependency with our smartphones, functioning, thus, as a simulacrum.

Moreover, by falsely claiming to collect and analyze personal data from the user's smartphone in order to provide a divine truth, *Soli* simulates the symbolic exchange that occurs between user and smartphone application. This exchange, defined by Baudrillard (*Mirror* 143) as an "uninterrupted cycle of giving and receiving" is exemplified by these circumstances in which tech companies offer us products for 'free' while we offer our data for 'free.' Furthermore, this non-monetary exchange of personal data as currency exists outside of traditional capitalist frameworks in which the production and consumption of commodities is theorized as resulting in the alienation of the Self from the material world; rather, the blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption and between labour and leisure that is inherent in the use of such applications results in the fragmentation of the Self across infinite real and virtual realms (*L'Échange symbolique* 53; *Transparence* 4).

Therefore, it is especially relevant, in the context of spiritual smartphone applications, that the user not only simultaneously produces and consumes information, but that, in both instances, the Self is the subject *and* the object of these economic activities. When, for example, a user reads their personalized horoscope on an astrology application, they are both consuming and producing information about the Self as the software surreptitiously gathers their private data in the background. The Self is at once the fleshy human holding the smartphone, a trackable set of algorithmically processed data, currency, product, consumer, labourer, an image of the desire for spiritual knowledge mediated through a digital screen, a supposed truth that can be revealed through technology, a reflection of the image of the virtual encountered in reality—all of these Selves gaze at one another, producing what Baudrillard

describes as “the virtual and irreversible confusion of the sphere of images and the sphere of a reality whose nature we are less and less able to grasp” (*Evil Demon* 13). This multidimensional fragmentation of the Self is, in the context of *Soli*’s exploration of the correlations between spirituality and technology, characterized by a total immersion of the user and the smartphone within one another until they are utterly indistinguishable.

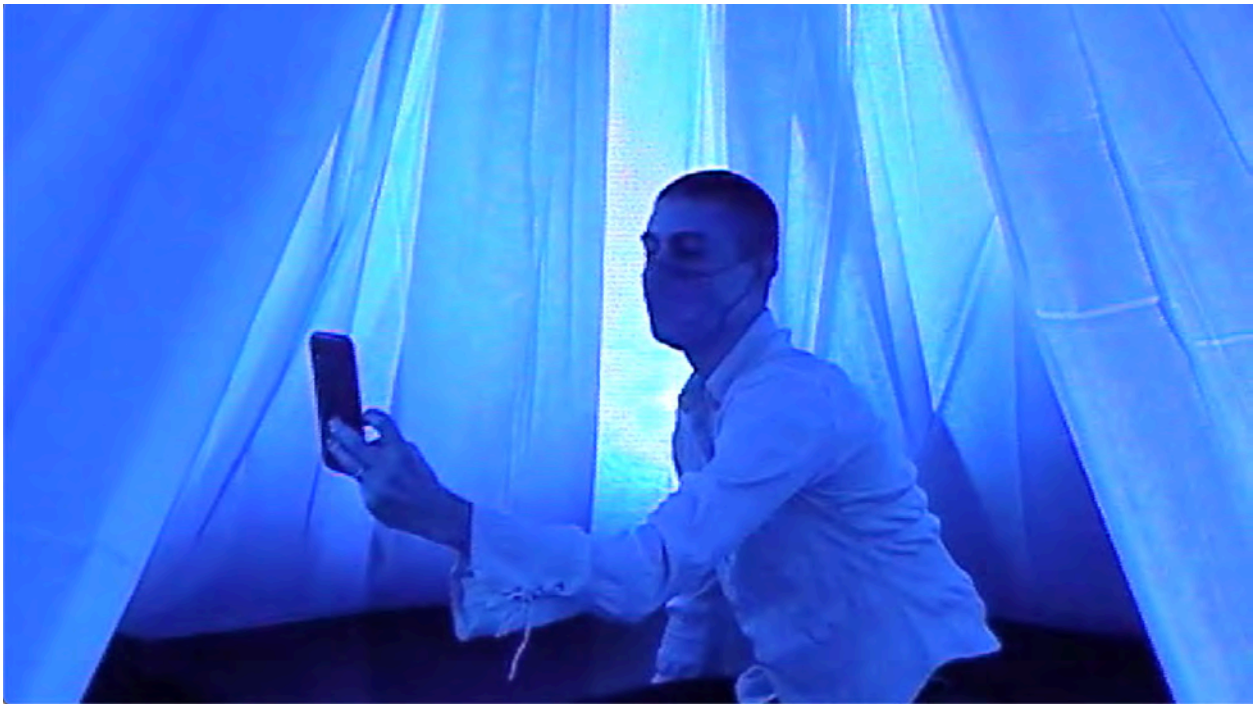

Fig. 5. User taking an aura selfie, April 2021, photo by Leona Nikolić

Emphasizing the significance of the smartphone as the technological object across which this fragmentation of the Self occurs, *Soli* deliberately requires the presence of both the user and their personal device for participation in the installation. However, by imagining the two as a unified being, the installation dismisses the simple notion that the smartphone functions as a portal between the real and the virtual that permits us to live on both sides of the

screen. Instead, this immersion of the user and smartphone within the spiritual context of the installation invokes Baudrillard's assertion that "there is no longer any man-machine distinction: the machine is on both sides of the interface… the human being having become the virtual reality of the machine" (*Screened Out* 177-178). Moreover, throughout its duration, the guided mediation portion of the installation reinforces the philosopher's notions of hyperreality in its insistence that users forget that there exists a separation between themselves and their devices. This synthesis of our Selves with our smartphones produces an "ecstasy of communication" in which "the comfortable vertige of this electronic, computer interaction [is] like the vertige induced by drugs" (*Screened Out* 179). Entranced by the miniature screens that rarely leave our sides, we seek emancipation from the terrestrial limits of reality in the infinite ecstasies of hyperreality.

Fig. 6. User's aura selfie printed on instant film, April 2021, photo by Kevin Calero

This quest for the transcendence of reality through our smartphones is ultimately a spiritual pursuit. As the incarnation of our desires and of our belief systems, the smartphone allows us to access what unmediated reality cannot offer us by circumventing terrestrial laws of time and space and distance (*Screened Out* 57-58). While Baudrillard never ventures so far as to explicitly make this connection between technology and spirituality, he discusses at length the efficiency of technology in transforming the earthly experience of reality into an otherworldly hallucination (*L'Échange symbolique* 115). Yet, despite our ecstatic immersion in this spiritual rejection of the real, reality remains in our imaginations as the alleged antidote to the fatigue of virtual excess. Reality is where we attempt to go to when we decide to digitally disconnect by escaping the city for nature, leaving our smartphones at home intentionally, or deleting our social media accounts. This longing to rediscover the vanished real, to reconnect with the real Self, is as much a spiritual pursuit as our rejection of reality through technological escapism.

It is this paradoxical tension between our insatiable infatuation with the spectacles of virtuality and our nostalgia for the unspoiled simplicity of an imagined reality that informs the foundations of my research-creation work with *Soli*. While the general reception of this installation and subsequent analyses based on user reactions remain undetermined as the public exhibition of *Soli* has not yet taken place at the time of writing, preliminary experimentations with users suggest that the nature of one's personal reflection in regard to the relationship between the Self and smartphone is contingent on one's willingness or predisposition to entrust *Soli* with revealing a divine truth. Among these users, some noted a critical engagement with these themes, some expressed confusion or uncertainty about the purpose of the experience, while others were, predictably, quite sceptical about the whole thing. By neither endorsing nor disapproving of our intimacy with our personal devices, there is potential for *Soli* to disrupt

opposing technophilic and technophobic narratives by proposing alternative ways to conceptualize our profound physical, mental, and spiritual oneness with our smartphones.

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Transparency and Sovereignty in Contact-tracing Networks

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Abstract

Threaded through Jean Baudrillard's writings on society, politics, and technology is the notion of transparency. Transparency features in several works critiquing the digital era: by rendering everything overexposed and proximate, media technology has facilitated a frictionless or, using Baudrillard's term, ecstatic flow of information. As transparency aligns itself semantically with frictionlessness and ecstasy, the question concerning the preconditions of transparency becomes pertinent. By advancing a reading of Singapore's TraceTogether application, this article proposes that embedded within Baudrillard's notion of transparency is the paradigm of friction: sovereignty. The TraceTogether team purports a non-invasive and privacy-preserving contact-tracing protocol. Circumventing the use of geo-location tracking, TraceTogether formulates a network of infected bodies based on proximity data by using Bluetooth Relative Signal Strength Indicator (RSSI) readings between devices with the application installed. The reduction of all markers of identification and differentiation—or, points of friction—into the same frictionless code belies an imperative invocation of sovereignty. Drawing on a range of thought that obliquely confronts the question of sovereignty and friction, this article frames the inquiry within the parameters of Jean Baudrillard and other theorists whose deliberations on infrastructure like architecture and networks are wrought upon the concept of transparency. The sovereign power to suspend or collapse the friction/frictionless binary calls into question the right to retain one's friction in this frictionless digital era. This article proposes a critical reading of topological transparency with a view to the political and bio-philosophical implications of what is at stake in proximity-tracing technologies.

Keywords

transparency, sovereignty, privacy, TraceTogether, contact-tracing

Mapping Life: Contact-tracing and Proximity-tracing

Transparency, in Baudrillard's writings, is framed as a symptom of a hyper-liberated world. The notion of transparency hinges upon the mechanics of hyper-prophylaxis wherein the social, somatic, or cerebral body purges itself of any form of difference. Transparency remains a germane concept in the networked and informationalized social system we continue to inhabit today. The concept has been invoked to address neoliberalism in the era of integral reality (Rubenstein; Gane). However, the ways in which transparency has been mobilised continue to be in the register of seamlessness and frictionlessness, whose only mode of interruption comes in the spectre of evil or virulence which still operates along the same logic of the frictionless. This paper presents an overlooked mode of interruption on which Baudrillard's transparency depends: the friction of sovereign power. Transparent transactions and circulations belie a sense of friction that is implied in Baudrillard's own vocabulary when describing transparency. Terms like "extirpating" (*The Intelligence of Evil* 146) and "enforced visibility" (*The Intelligence of Evil* 94) used to describe the mechanisms of transparency remind us that the term is inextricably bound up with and depends on forceful execution.

Concerned with the ways in which transparency engenders and results in purification of difference, Baudrillard's sociological theory of technology confers an urgency to reading digital contact tracing against the backdrop of the recent epidemiological crisis. Momentum in research on the use of mobile phones to trace communicable diseases picked up in the last decade (Farrahi et al.; Yoneki et al.). These approaches, however, still regarded geolocation as a precondition of contact tracing. When Singapore implemented the Bluetooth-based

proximity-tracing system during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the question of demographic topology became pertinent. As a technology that maps proximity rather than geolocation, the TraceTogether application utilizes Bluetooth technology to measure the Received Signal Strength Indicator (RSSI) reading between mobile devices. Using the recent pandemic as the milieu within which a new urban topology takes shape, this paper visualizes the operations of contact-tracing based on proximity data and delineates the implications of proximity-tracing technologies on the co-implicated concepts of transparency, sovereignty, and privacy.

Friction and Transparency

Baudrillard's catapult to fame in the late-twentieth century occurred amongst other critical thinkers offering ways to account for morphological changes of the time. The concern with locating and mapping the individual within urban structures came to occupy the writings belonging to this tradition. One of the symptoms accompanying modernity, Walter Benjamin intimates, is the training of the human sensorium according to the rules of a growing urban landscape (175). The individual thus find themselves under the imperative of an urban syntax facilitated by technological signals, both optic and haptic.

Picking up on the shift from *flâneur* to pedestrian, Frederic Jameson's ecology of the shopping mall and hyperspace of the Bonaventure Hotel explore the implications of this topological shift in the interpretation of urban structures ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 14; "Future City" 71). Within these postmodern spaces, the individual not only acquires an urban literacy by which their sensoria become attuned to traffic lights, screens, and other pedestrians, he also develops new organs to navigate *the* urban structure: the multi-storied building. The problematics of locating the body and tracing its movements within these urban structures necessitate a reconfiguration of how bodies can be organized and mapped.

The paradigmatic shift from the cartographic map to the reticulated network is one accompanied by the uptake of digital technologies. As ethnology and tourism gridded the world and extirpated it of otherness in the nineteenth century, the rise of digital technologies saw a radical acceleration of this movement. The topology of the network occupied the technological imaginary from the late-twentieth century onwards. Vocabulary like "reticulated" society (Stiegler 37) mark a shift towards the re-conceptualization of the population as network. The genealogy of demographic topology appears to follow the trajectory of increasing frictionlessness: while modern human finds friction all around the urban structures which compel them to *react* to their stimuli, the node in the network faces no such friction. Rather, it moves adaptively within a mutative reticulum at the level of reflexivity and automaticity. Accordingly, reticulation, for Stiegler, conjures the phenomenon of automation: if the manual relies on the friction of the corporeal, then the *auto*matic involves rendering frictionless of the self [*autos*]. Using knowledge as shock as an example, Stiegler warns that the impetus of the data economy in information circulations threatens to render us stupid, which always proceeds from automaticity (25).

Beyond the concern of reversing this epistemological predicament, Baudrillard offers the adjective "ecstatic," rather than "stupid," to describe this transparent circulation. From the Greek *ἐκ-* which means "out" and *ἱστάναι* "to place," ecstasy holds within its etymological roots the sense of an extrusion of the self who is not tied down to place. The ecstasy of circulation, then, refers to a frictionless flow within reticulated society: it conjures the image of pure circulation without referent to material conditions of urban life. Where "stupid" implies a semantic valuation, "ecstatic" emphasizes the relation that structures the self and its mode of circulation. Ecstasy as a conceit for transparent circulation is picked up by Baudrillard in his

take on the same architecture that occupied Jameson's critique of postmodern society. The Bonaventure Hotel has "[no] interior/exterior interface. The glass facades merely reflect the environment, sending back its own image….Everywhere the transparency of interfaces ends in internal refraction" (Baudrillard, *America* 59). The glass architecture blends into the urban landscape by disappearing into its own reflection. Reflection and refraction both involve a game of interfaces and reduplication (of their own images) so that the friction of difference or otherness has no place in this ecstatic circulation.

In its immediate impression, transparency implicates a sense of pure frictionlessness and unresisting flows within short-circuits. However, mobilising Baudrillard's famous analogy of a biological form of transparency, the total(izing) immunity of asepsis summons the image of a techno-pharmaco sovereign: the militaristic parlance of bio-medicine—defence, protection, and prophylaxis—mobilizes immunity as a problem of boundary maintenance. Undergirding absolute asepsis lies the sovereign technique of instrumentalizing borders, which forms the basis on which the immune system operates as sole arbiter of boundaries—inside/outside, self/other, and friend/enemy. The values on the left of the solidus need to be secured from the relentless threat embodied by the other side of the divide: an incursion of which could result in disease, infection, and contagion. Hence, even as transparency delineates the frictionless—and safe—circulation within and of the self, as the image the Bubble Boy presents, the force behind this techno-pharmacological imaginary reminds us of sovereign power and its concern with ceaselessly maintaining territories and boundaries. To draw and maintain boundaries, as Foucault has argued, is precisely the prerogative of the sovereign to "make war on his enemies" (*Discipline and Punish* 48). If the introduction of difference—

other/enemy/pathogen—is the originary power of the sovereign, then the reverse—the purification of difference—must still belong to this order.

Baudrillard's notion of transparency brings the seemingly disparate terms of reference into a chimerical formulation: as a kind of frictionless sovereignty, especially in the sense Ryan Bishop (2020) mobilizes, the operations of reticulated society needs must operate as an aporia. Even as the urban network of labour, capital, and services flow along frictionless lines of circulation, these frictionless movements are contingent on a sovereign call for the lifting—and administration—of friction. As Bishop observes, frictionless sovereignty:

> is oxymoronical because sovereignty requires some sort of resistance—some force or other, some state or territorial challenge, some excess or breach—which would serve as a challenge to legitimize the authority and necessity of that sovereignty while thus proving its authority through its triumph over resistance. The formulation of frictionless sovereignty is redundant because the notion of the sovereign is that which operates self-evidently within its domain, that which can enact its will with impunity. (n.p.)

Bishop's exposition of the term "frictionless sovereignty" amounts to a negotiation of the contiguity between Foucault's sovereignty and Baudrillard's transparency. Even as the two writers embark on sharply differing theoretical projects, the tensions between Foucault and Baudrillard are reconciled apropos of the relationship between friction and frictionlessness.

Taking as a starting point the shift in modes of governance from the seventeenth century onwards, Foucault suggests in several writings and lectures that sovereign power—to "let live" and "make die"—comes to be informed by its inverse. What is striking in Foucault's delineation of sovereignty is the effect it has on the subject: the subject before sovereign power is "neither dead nor alive" because it is by virtue of said power that the neutral state of the

subject can either live or die ("Society Must be Defended" 240). Reading Hegel through Nietzsche, Baudrillard similarly contends that this unilateral granting of life—or, in other words, debt—constitutes the basis of sovereign power (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 61). The state of suspension that gives rise to the neutral or indebted subject is coextensive with the "sudden, violent, discontinuous" form in which sovereignty is necessarily exercised (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 208). Sovereignty, thus, suspends the binary of either/or—either dead or living after the sovereign decision—insofar as it can, with impunity, implement the collapsing of the binary.

As Bishop's "frictionless sovereignty" suggests, sovereignty necessarily involves the invocation of resistance or friction, as with the declaration of a state of emergency or the unilateral implementation of digital surveillance in the name of a bio-security threat. However, sovereignty also embodies frictionless discretion to circulate within a given—not always territorial—domain. Undergirding the frictionless suspension of the friction/frictionless binary is, concomitantly, the absolute friction of sovereign power. When Baudrillard writes about transparency, he draws upon the aporetic conditions on which frictionless circulations are contingent. In what he calls the "différance of death," by which the slave is condemned to a "slow death" by labor, Baudrillard postulates that frictionless exchange in consumer society operates, in Hegelian terms, according to the master's dialectic (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 61-62). Only with an irruptive and violent death—the reintroduction of the stakes of life and death of the slave/laborer—can the inexorable circulation of labor, wage, and consumption be interrupted. Thus, even as Baudrillard emphasises the frictionless part of the dyad in his writings on transparency, it becomes clear that the friction of sovereign power is taken to be the *sine qua non* of the former. The purification of the specter of difference and the ecstasy of

being in frictionless circulation, underwritten by the promise of transparency, hinges upon this understanding of sovereignty.

Topological Transparency

a. Geolocation vs Proximity

Against this theoretical backdrop, Baudrillard takes as his starting point the transparent topology that characterizes contemporary societies. Transparency presupposes a network of circulation with minimal referent to the material urban structures: irreducible to either the *flâneur* or the pedestrian, Baudrillard's schizophrenic individual (im)materializes, in an apposite image, as a fractal token by proximity-tracing technologies.

Key to Baudrillard's notion of transparency is not so much the denotation of having information laid bare to state apparatuses; rather, it entails the reduction of information to a common code all the better to facilitate frictionless circulation. Even as private and personal information are encrypted, this reduction of life to code renders *inter alia* our behaviors, thoughts, desires, and movements transparent. In the case of TraceTogether, users of the application are delivered over to a topological form of transparency where identifiable information becomes plateau-ed into frictionless and temporally-marked virtual tokens. The implementation of a pioneering technology for contact tracing reinvests historical cogency in Baudrillard's notion of transparency. Through a reading of TraceTogether's operations, this section demonstrates how the friction of sovereignty operates as a precondition of frictionless transparency.

Proximity-tracing re-conceptualises the urban syntax by cleaving surveillance from geolocation. Indeed, the claim to privacy in TraceTogether's white paper emphasizes the collection of proximity data without the need for geolocation surveillance (Bay). Proximity

tracing as a form of surveillance belongs not so much to the panoptic order as it does to the protocological domain: it is less interested in disciplinary intervention—in breaking up useless or bad circulations—than it is in suspending or deferring friction. TraceTogether's vision for society aligns more closely with Baudrillard's than Foucault's transparency: while the latter dreams of a hypervisible society with panoptic surveillance, the former offers orgiastic circulations mediated by technological protocols. The subject before sovereign power—neither dead nor alive—emerges as the same subject in TraceTogether's transparent network, with the stakes less of life/death and more of friction/frictionlessness with permutations in social, economic, and physical circulation.

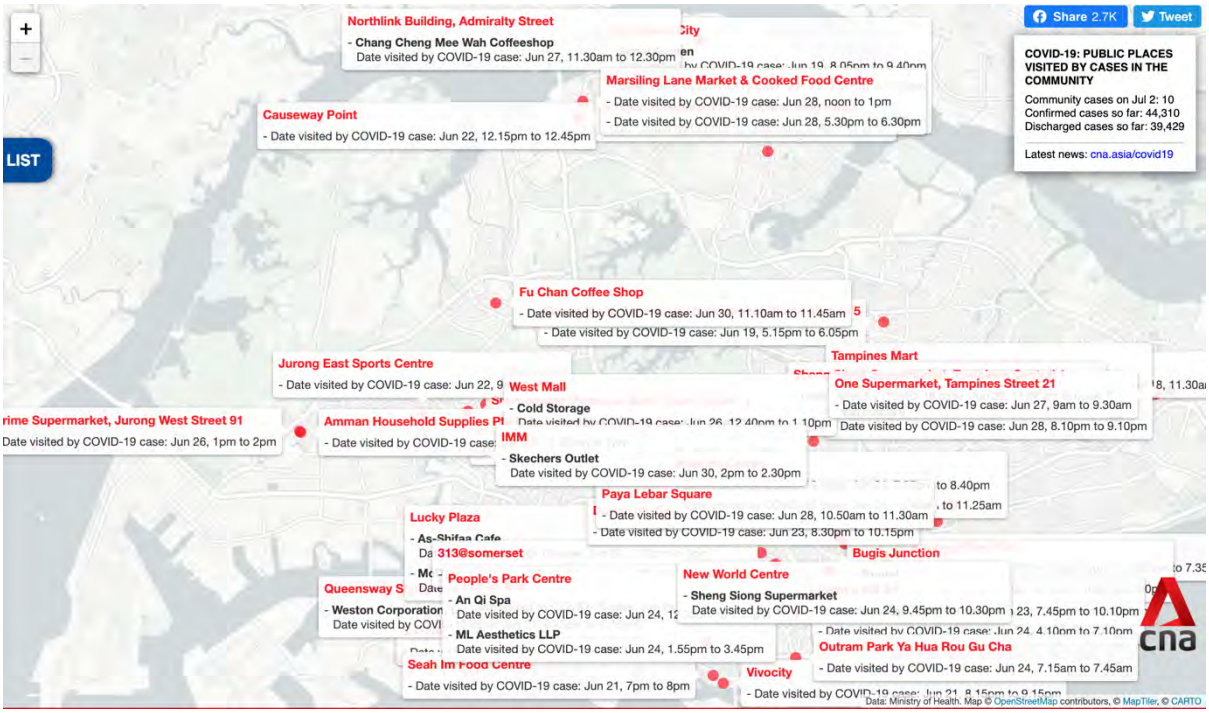

Fig. 1. Screenshot of interactive Singapore Map with list of public places visited by COVID-19 cases in the community by Channel News Asia (CNA), https://infographics.channelnewsasia.com/covid-19/singapore-map-places-visited-by-community-cases.html?cid=cna-main-covid19-places-visited_desktop-banner_17062020_cna. Accessed 5 July 2020. The cartographic map has since been replaced by a tree diagram of sporadic clusters in the local community. Courtesy of the author.

TraceTogether's proximity-tracing technology reshapes the topological imaginary of what is brought to bear on contact tracing and, by extension, mappability, surveillance, and privacy. Tracing the movements and interactions of bodies within the framework of transparency revolves around the question of *topos*. Traditional contact-tracing methods involve reporting the locations which the infected have visited. The epidemiological topography of the map is grounded in the physical and architectural sense of *topos*.

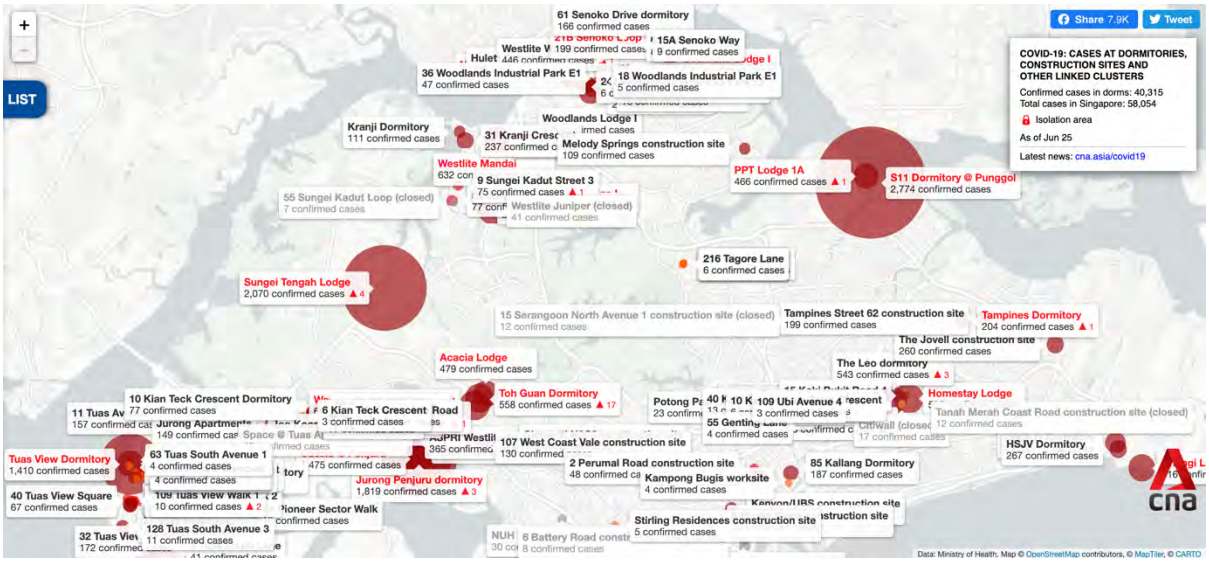

Fig. 2. Screenshot of interactive Singapore Map with list of cases at foreign worker dormitories and construction sites by Channel News Asia (CNA), https://infographics.channelnewsasia.com/covid-19/singapore-map.html?cid=covid19-main-singaporemap_desktop-banner_15042020_cna. Accessed 8 November 2020. Last updated by CNA on 25th July 2020 upon the steady decline of cases in foreign worker dormitories. Courtesy of the author.

One of the earlier records for tracing the spread of COVID-19 came in the form of COVID maps. These maps (Fig. 1) illustrated the public places where COVID cases were reported, replete with respective time and dates. During a "circuit breaker" period, it became clear that a separate cartographic map (Fig. 2), detailing the cases found in foreign worker dormitories, was required to account for the scale of the outbreak clusters. In an implosion of

viral short-circuits, the Potemkin dormitories unveiled the extensive farce maintained under "normal" times. These areas of topological friction serve as a testament to the way in which the dream of a thoroughly transparent society cannot be realized insofar as Singapore persists in shoring up the narrative of frictionless mobility while overlooking the bodies who contribute to the nation's transparent infrastructure.

While cartographic representations of the pandemic have been instrumental in visualizing hot spots in the early stages of the pandemic, the TraceTogether team recognizes the need to supplement the cartographic method with digital contact tracing. Given the general suspicion surrounding surveillance apparatuses, TraceTogether opted for proximity- rather than geolocation tracing. The normalized order that public landmarks bring—not least, shopping malls, places of worship, and amusement parks—is destabilized by the SARS-CoV-2 emergency: public spaces where people congregate, interact and circulate become the very hotspots for contagion. Architecture, which served up geolocation information with totalising clarity, became blackboxes for epidemiological crises. Within the urban architectural terrain, time-based contact points between people become impossible to trace based on geolocation data. The building as *the* urban structure required a technology that can account for its syntax.

b. "Who" vs. "Where"

Where geolocation constituted the first way of mapping COVID cases, the introduction of proximity tracing (Apple; Bay) provides a novel way to organize the infection topology. Eschewing geolocation tagging as an option for contact tracing during the epidemiological crisis, TraceTogether boasts of its ability to preserve the user's privacy and overcome issues of accuracy within urban structures. One of the anticipated Frequently Asked Questions on the TraceTogether website goes: "Can TraceTogether track the location of all phones installed

with the TraceTogether App?" To this justifiably paranoid question, TraceTogether responds with the assurance that the application does not "collect or use physical location data (e.g. GPS, WiFi fingerprinting, cell ID)"; it only records proximity data via BlueTooth technology. In other words, TraceTogether identifies the "*who*" rather than the "*where*" (TraceTogether 2020).

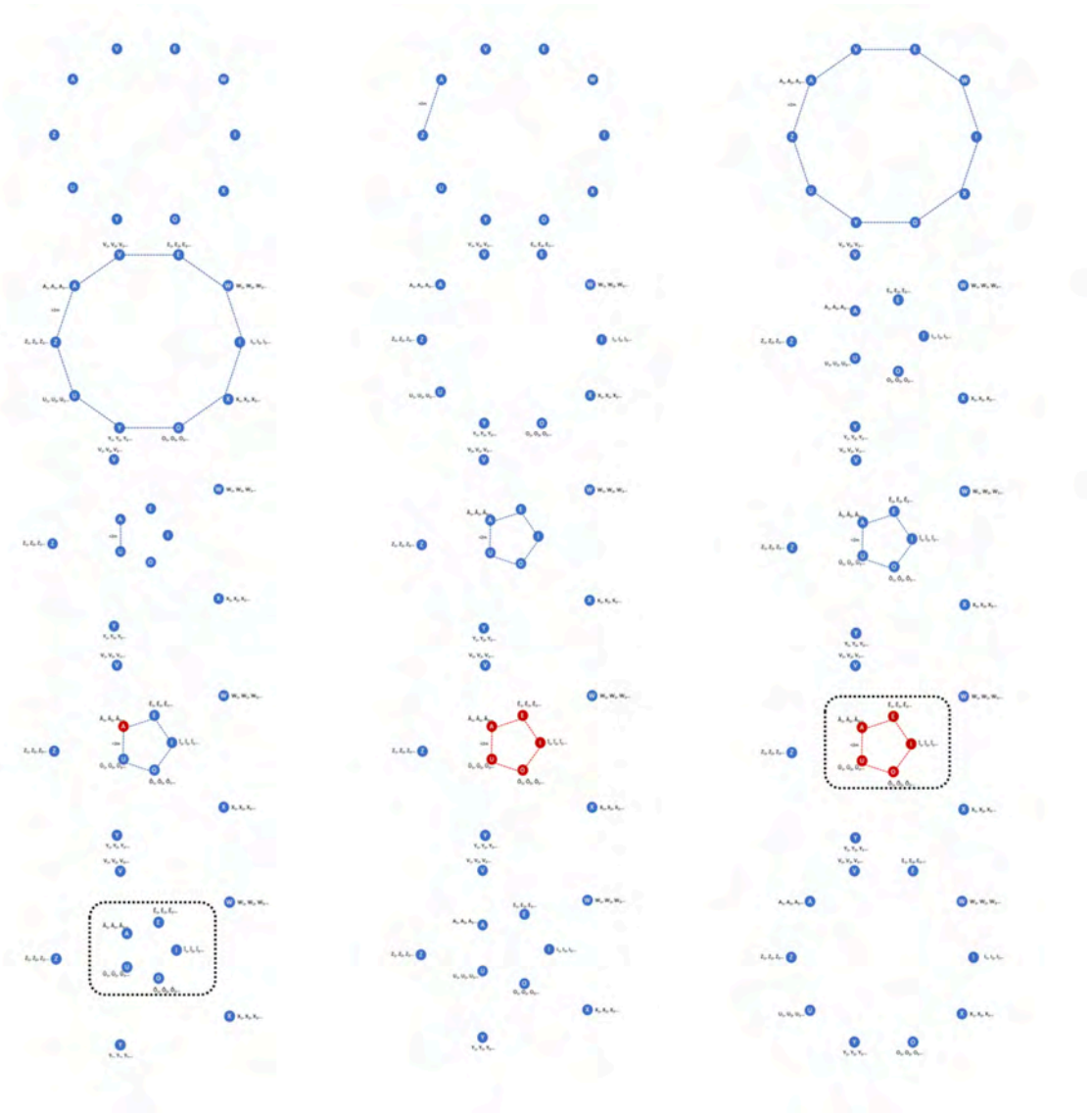

Fig. 3. Visualizing the Proximity-tracing Network by TraceTogether (left to right). Each individual is represented by a letter-node with tokens emitted at regular time-based intervals. When individuals *A, E, I, O,* and *U* get into a proximity of less than two meters, the tokens emitted are marked with a circumflex. If A gets tested positive for the virus, the app flags *E* and *U* who have been in close proximity with A. If E and U also test positive, I and O are subsequently flagged. Adaptive quarantine is implemented only on these five individuals even if *V, W, X, Y*, and *Z* were in the same building, floor, or shop. Visualization available in video format at https://vimeo.com/546033271. Stills and video courtesy of the author.

The "*who*" that registers for the app using their National Registration Identification Card (NRIC) number[1]—which can reveal personal information like one's name, age, date of birth, residence, and, less directly, one's passport number, mobile number, email address, driving license, and any other administration and transactions that pass through the Singapore government—finds their digital double suspended and fractalized into temporal tokens unless an epidemiological event occurs in the form of a transmission or an outbreak. The topological "failure"—or, the friction—of the map in contact-tracing is thus overcome with proximity-tracing, which is touted as a "privacy-preserving" protocol that need not rely on geolocation or identifiable data in order for it to operate. Using Bluetooth technology, proximity-tracing apps like TraceTogether emit temporal tokens for each user's device. Following the idea that networks are capable of capturing time-based interactions and intervals in its topological structure, this paper provides a hypothetical visualization for the operations of proximity-tracing as described in the TraceTogether white paper. Without reference to geolocation markers exemplified by the map, the nodes in the network are reified by temporal (A_1, A_2, A_3) and proximity tokens ($\hat{A}_1$, $\hat{A}_2$, $\hat{A}_3$).

The topology of proximity-tracing networks, without corresponding to an architectural referent, concerns the organisation and arrangement of nodes within the network *topos*. Proximity-tracing re-organizes the urban architecture and re-writes its syntax insofar as the network that arises from this landscape is no longer met with the friction of "opacity and inertia" associated with the individual (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 66). Concerned more with the "who" than the "where," TraceTogether's technological imaginary envisions a network of transparent circulation where opaque difference is reconfigured into virtual tokens and privacy is putatively maintained (TraceTogether 2020). Markers of reality like identity and geolocation,

which are irreducible sources of difference and differentiation, have no place in the dream of a transparent world: difference can be eradicated when these markers become relegated to the pure and frictionless relation of proximity.

The visualisation of proximity tracing in Figure 3 encapsulates this aspect of transparency but it also problematizes the frictionless claims purported by TraceTogether. The frictionless can only (de)materialize under the imperative of sovereignty. Sovereignty leaches into the fantasy of transparency at two levels: first, as a precondition of transparency and second, in the suspension or collapsing of the friction/frictionless binary. The frictionless mobility of individuals belie the sovereign imperative to download the TraceTogether application or collect a TraceTogether token—in other words, to mark oneself temporally (A_1, A_2, A_3) and proximately ($\hat{A}_1$, $\hat{A}_2$, $\hat{A}_3$). That the use of TraceTogether in public venues will not be mandatory until the uptake rate reaches a certain threshold brings nothing to bear on the way transparency operates as and depends on a kind of mandate itself (Wong). The "option" of using TraceTogether becomes Hobson's choice: citizens face no penalty for not using the TraceTogether app or token and, under a Deleuzian mode of control, have the freedom to move about without fear of punitive action from the state. However, the other side of the control mechanism—rather than punishment—entails being disbarred from places which require the TraceTogether app or token. The entire premise of TraceTogether as a form of technological control consists precisely of the toggling between the frictionless freedom to go about one's business and the friction of responding to the state's summons in the case of an epidemiological event. Prioritising fluidity, efficiency, and iterability—all characteristics TraceTogether operations embody—transparency is invoked by and, in turn, invokes sovereignty over the topological relations of proximity.

Indeed, transparency precisely presupposes this sovereign toggling between antipodes of friction and frictionlessness. The free-floating individuals in the TraceTogether visualisation only find their proximate relations with the sovereign invocation of a *line*, however virtual. As Cornelia Vismann (2013) propounds in her exposition of cultural techniques, the line—an archaic *Kulturtechniken*—operates as a sovereign technology which demarcates one's territory: "the *Imperium Romanum* is the result of drawing a line" (84). Pushing Vismann's insight on the connection between line-drawing and sovereignty further, the TraceTogether visualisation advances a critique of the co-implicated notions of friction, sovereignty, and transparency. The line in the visualisation belongs not so much to the order of territorial sovereignty but rather the realm of techno-political tracing. In the epidemiological measure of contact tracing, tracing necessarily involves producing and reifying relations that might otherwise remain abstract. In the proximity tracing visualisation, however, the tracing that occurs positions the virtual lines of connectivity as an imperative: the abstract becomes the source of sovereign intervention. As the dotted lines virtually connecting individuals are ceaselessly and iteratively drawn and re-drawn, friction is also discretionally suspended and implemented.

The tyranny of geolocation is no more—or is it? On the one hand, proximity tracing does away with using absolute location as a way to identify individuals for quarantine. In its place, the relative position of individuals while following the "rules" of the infrastructure—its walls, entrances, corridors, and storeys—is taken to be the measurement of infectivity. On the other hand, proximity tracing's fantasy of a transparent society not only hinges upon the friction of sovereign power which (en)codes sovereignty into the praxis of transparent and frictionless circulation, it also re-introduces a new topology of geolocation landmarks. Perhaps a less literal rendition of the military tactic of "walking through walls" (Weizman 199), proximity-tracing's

interpretations of the urban landscape remain startling similar: the building is not a homogenous structure taken to be as a totalising landmark on the map but one that is made up of its own internal syntax.

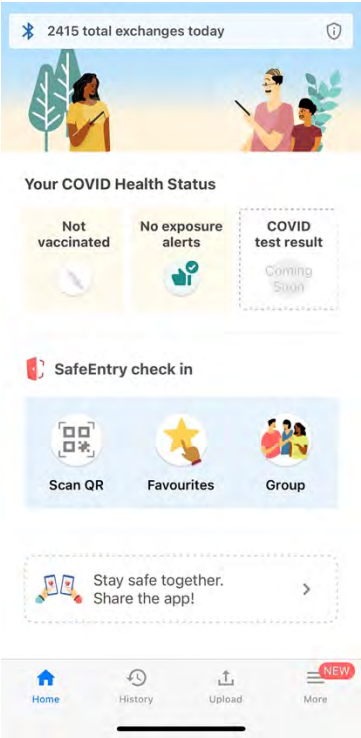

Fig. 4. Screenshot of homepage interface on author's TraceTogether application (Version 2.7). Accessed 7 May 2021. Courtesy of the author.

The SafeEntry system implemented one month after the government rolled out the TraceTogether app confirms the aporetic operations of topological transparency. The SafeEntry system set up at all points of ingress and egress operate as checkpoints whose passage have become the sites of friction: the people who enter and exit these infrastructural media are none other than sovereign bodies who are afforded the freedom to circulate. In a paradoxical formulation which captures the kernel of transparency, only when sovereignty is invoked can friction be lifted and transparency thereby achieved; at the same time, however, these frictionless

bodies, in an involution, also become carriers of sovereignty in their very transparency. Striking is the added feature[2] on the TraceTogether app in Figure 4: on top of its original function to trace Bluetooth proximity signals, the application now offers the function of scanning QR codes at SafeEntry checkpoints. The proximity of these two teleologically differing features—proximity-tracing and checkpoint tracking—serves a testament to the troubled imaginary propounded by topological transparency: the weaving of friction into frictionless circulations. What, then, does this reading of transparency bring to bear on the proverbial conundrum of privacy and security?

Privacy in a Transparent World

TraceTogether's design to protect the users' privacy ineluctably alters the way we understand and experience the concept: the narrative of privacy maintained by the developers of proximity-tracing applications falls into the realm of simulation wherein the overexposed city replete with surveillance apparatuses attempts to demarcate loci for the retention of the friction of the private and personal. That the irony of a technology which envisions a transparent world also promises the preservation of privacy should not be lost on us. Especially with tracking technologies like TraceTogether, the question of privacy in light of digital surveillance needs to be reframed in terms of friction/frictionless rather than of privacy/security. Indeed, in recent critiques of big data and surveillance, the concern becomes less of negotiating between privacy and security and more of the position one can take apropos of digital surveillance apparatuses.

In the age of algorithmic governmentality, data-collecting apparatuses call upon the individual to account for themselves rather than the other way around (Rouvroy 145). Victims of these apparatuses are held to a "far higher standard of evidence" than the technological apparatuses that track them (O'Neil 10). Accordingly, one's relationship vis-à-vis one's digital subject becomes a matter of politics: the ability to deviate from one's virtual avatar or to refuse

the turning of everything into a potential data point becomes increasingly bound up with the technics of claiming and maintaining distance between oneself and one's digital subject (Goriunova 130). Indeed, Deborah Lupton's (2016) critique of self-surveillance devices reminds us that the body as the irreducible resource of data is also the source of risk and unpredictability. The collapse of the ethos of "self-care" into civic duty, as Lupton observes, emerges from the neoliberal imperative of self-governance (111). Whether the nostrum of algorithmic governmentality comes from philosophy—going back to Agamben's "form-of-life" or looking towards Stiegler's care [*panser*]—or from sociological critiques interrogating the ways in which subjectivity can be retained apropos of digital surveillance, the choice of opting out of the increasingly technologized globalscape dwindles. Implicit in the corpus of contemporary media theory, which Baudrillard pioneered and within which he remains pertinent, is the sense that these technological apparatuses are here to stay: the acknowledgement of the permanence of digital surveillance indicates that a shift in framing the problem of privacy and surveillance is needed.

Transparency renders privacy epiphenomenal in this era, not so much as the result of increasingly invasive surveillance technologies but because the discourse surrounding these technologies mark a point in time when the concept of privacy loses its historical purchase. At the "height of obscenity" (Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil* 187), the recurring vocabulary concerning privacy in contact-tracing narratives is an unsurprising symptom of the disappearance of privacy. If the private, following the parlance of the TraceTogether white paper (2020), is that which marks or identifies the individual, then to render society transparent from the epidemiological perspective of proximity tracing involves removing all identifiers that reflect any kind of material truth. It is precisely the reduction of personal information to this common,

frictionless code—temporal tokens or TempIDs—that renders possible the endless, fractal reproduction of "us," or at least our proximal relations, in real time. The gambit involved in staking a claim on privacy with security apparatuses like TraceTogether renegotiates the old problem of privacy versus security and a newer problem concerning the explosion of non-"personally identifiable information" (Bay 1).

The question concerning the right to retain or invoke one's own friction—to opt out of this frictionless circulation by maintaining the discreteness of personal information—becomes increasingly urgent. Neither a *flâneur* nor the pedestrian, the TraceTogether user diffracted into mitotic tokens materialize as isomorphic "I"s without reference to any material reality. Concomitantly, if in each fractal, the whole organism's information is contained, then the tokens which are touted to protect the user's privacy by adding layers of anonymity do nothing more than reproduce these very information to the nth-power. The fate of privacy in a transparent world entails its diffraction into multiple bits of privacy-protecting information: TraceTogether's preservation of privacy necessitates the replication and amplification of temporal tokens at the virtual level.

Concomitantly, the exponential growth of digitalized personal information, in turn, witnesses the amplification of their interceptability: fractal beings multiply the sites of potential politico-technological intervention. The private can no longer be located on the horizon of "privacy-preserving" proximity-tracing technologies insofar as this virtual build-up of private information multiplies itself indefinitely. The private and personal, which serve as points of friction, also become sites of sovereign intervention: the option to maintain one's opacity or resist being rendered frictionless dwindles against the backdrop of contagion-related emergencies

and technologies that appeal to the language of the preservation of privacy while overlooking the politico-ethical questions of agency and resistance.

Indeed, the recourse to proximity-tracing during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is tantamount to the deferral not just of privacy but also of anything that might amount to an event. The deferral of a biopolitical event in which even the friction of sovereign intervention cannot alleviate casts a specter of the entropic catastrophe which Stiegler (2016) believes lies ahead of automatic societies. The transparent world works increasingly hermetically, and as the world grows smaller via short-circuits as the result of uncritical implementations of technologies under the hypochondriac declaration of "states of emergencies"—declarations that call for suspension of everyday life, for justifications for overreaching, and for, as Baudrillard would say, hyperprophylaxis or, Agamben might say, governing according to worst-case scenarios—the catastrophe grows progressively in scale. As Collier and Lakoff (2015) have observed on biopolitics of vital systems, life is not an amalgamation of discrete organisms, but rather dependent on a complex ecology of critical systems whose disruptions serve more of a danger than the actual catastrophe itself. The stakes in technologically advanced countries, like the kind Singapore envisions itself to be—a Smart Nation—shift from mortality to morbidity. In what they call "a significant mutation in biopolitical modernity" (21), biopolitics from the twentieth century onwards conceived life as inherently collective and technological (not necessarily digital). The continued functioning of daily life was just as, if not more, vital and urgent than mitigating the primary cause of emergency. In Singapore's case, labour was divided into essential and inessential, with doctors, cleaners, garbage collectors, hawker centre vendors, and delivery people making the former's list (Straits Times). During the epidemiological circuit breaker, only essential labourers were permitted to move about for the maintenance and

operations on which quotidian life depended. The biopolitical event, rather than epidemiological, materialises as administrative instead: the crisis had more to do with managing resources than the mortality rates of the pandemic (Baker and Mohan).

As TraceTogether solves an administrative and protocological rather than an epidemiological problem, it comes as no surprise that the biopolitical event can metastasise across domains of governance. When it was announced that the Singapore Police Force could obtain TraceTogether data for criminal investigations, the platitudes rehashing the privacy-preserving ethos of the BlueTrace protocol became the government's recourse (Mohan; Ang and Abdullah). The slippage from epidemiology to forensics cannot be interpreted as anything but a calculated fallout of Singapore's biopolitical strategies. Faced with politicians who have no qualms about admitting to "errors" in legislative disclosures (rather than overreach) and an increasingly technologized future to keep up with the ever-expanding ballpark of emergencies and ever-decreasing threshold of tolerance for disruption, Singapore cannot expect to shore these retrospective interventions against the ramifications of its techno-political strategies and protocols. Rather than enumerating the spheres in which TraceTogether can be used, the government's techno-biopolitical strategy seems to be working retroactively to declare non-exemptions to the reach of the jurisdiction of TraceTogether. When future technologies prove to make the citizenry even more transparent—more frictionless—one can expect that the friction of sovereign intervention to come from similar justifications of expediency, urgency, and the candor of a politician being "blindsided" by the "ingenuity and brilliance" of technology (Choo 2021).

That the fundamental assumption regarding surveillance technologies is that they are applicable anywhere unless further qualified only feeds into Singapore's vision of a transparent

Smart Nation. As a reminder of Baudrillard's historical cogency, what he terms Integral Reality has, in the name of national emergency, seamlessly percolated from the social to the political, if they could be thought apart in the first place. Integral Reality, for Baudrillard, describes the drive to frustrate anything that might threaten the "great game" of frictionless abstraction and, by extension, the eruption of an event (*The Intelligence of Evil*). Indeed, as Ryan Bishop and John Phillips (2007) reading Baudrillard in the year of his passing write, "the global order is set up with increasing intensity to militate against such chances, against 'the luck of the event'" (138). TraceTogether marks the point of no return in how the social body can be ceaselessly and frictionlessly surveiled while maintaining the promise of privacy.

Without necessarily entailing a technocratic government or a selfish corporation, the dangers of proximity tracing is structural rather than semantic. The event horizon of proximity tracing sets a new precedent for the way in which information can be collected on grounds of forestalling an emergency: in Singapore's "war on COVID," the pre-empted events materialize as a problem of managing resources, whether they be healthcare staff and equipment, financial reserves, or critical supply chains (Ramakrishna). However, in framing the population as modulatory networks of proximities, the cost lies not so much in the negative—the giving up of one's information—but rather in the positive, even additive, harnessing of privacy-protecting information. In line with Baudrillard's (2005) fatalism in his later writings, what ensues is the reduplication of non-personal information indefinitely against a blank backdrop to defer a biopolitical catastrophe A_1, A_2, A_3,…

Notes

[1] Only from Version 2.0 onwards did TraceTogether require ID verification in order to register for the application.

[2] Version 2.1 included an update that embedded a QR scanning feature in the TraceTogether application that allowed the user to "seamlessly check[] in/out to [sic] SafeEntry locations" (TraceTogether 2021).

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Mediating Quarantine: Considering Netflix's *Homemade* through Baudrillard's Hyperreal and the Banal

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Abstract

Baudrillard has long been used to analyze media through critical, postmodern theory and as this paper shows, his work remains relevant as a lens through which to continue to view new works. This article considers how hyperreality and banality have made their way into viewers' homes with international representations of life during the Coronavirus pandemic. By investigating production processes, artistic choices, and narrative content contained within Netflix's *Homemade* series released in June 2020, this article considers how the remediation of quarantine exemplifies Baudrillard's hyperreality and the banal. By considering how *Homemade* remediates quarantine's social, cultural, physical, and economic realities, the films call attention to an age of increased information: we cannot escape the banal. Today, just as when Baudrillard first suggested it, the dissolution between reality and representation can be found throughout culture, leading to questions about the gap between art and the banal. As such, Baudrillard will remain a seminal media scholar who provides a distinct context through which to analyze and evaluate media and the world around us.

Keywords

Homemade, Netflix, quarantine, Coronavirus, Baudrillard, banal, hyperreality

> *For Baudrillard, there is no event, only its simulacrum, imploding the distinction of reality and image, message and medium, and site and studio. There is no shared, organically extended experience, only individual viewers, isolated in their technologically mediated experience, avoiding all contact or exchange. There is no shared reality, only the vicarious consumption of the signs of the real in the comfort of one's distance and pleasure of their guaranteed reference, with a succession of spectacular images. There is no global consciousness or awareness, only a real-time experience and scene imploding meaning and short-circuiting historical resonance. There is no participation, only its simulacrum, and no involvement, only a detached fascination for the corpse of a reality that is exterminated.*
>
> (Merrin 59)

Introduction

Within his career, Baudrillard wrote extensively about viruses (*Screened Out*), but it is uncertain he could have foreseen 2020's lockdown, quarantine, and social distancing policies. Yet one cannot help but see similarities with 2020's media viewers in the summary of Baudrillard's work above. Separated from family and loved ones, many people were isolated, partaking in individual "technologically mediated experience[s]," taking in, "only the vicarious consumption of the signs of the real in the comfort of one's distance and pleasure of their guaranteed references," like watching television shows and films on streaming platforms like Netflix, even watching films concerning quarantine's banality.

On June 30, 2020, Netflix released the anthology series, *Homemade*. *Homemade* was created by Lorenzo Mieli, Juan de Dios Larrain, and Pablo Larrain and produced by The Apartment Pictures, a Fremantle company, and Fabula. *Homemade* features 17 short films, each created by a different international filmmaker. These films were written, directed, filmed,

and edited while these filmmakers were in lockdown or quarantine, and/or practicing social distancing due to the pandemic. In lockdown, filmmakers developed narratives using common household items, often featuring and/or involving family members, and predominantly filmed from home using personal technologies including cell phones, video chat, cameras, and drones. The films represent a cultural prism into the lives and imaginations of some of the leading directors around the world.

The films within the *Homemade* orient viewers towards broad social contexts while simultaneously constructing precise and local contexts. In the personal experiences and imaginative stories showcased, filmmakers identify these discursive contexts and show how the virus affects life worldwide. The majority of the films are documentary in nature, yet even some fictional films, like Kristen Stewart's *Crickets* discussed later in this work, feel banal in their over-familiarity. Months after quarantines forced people inside, quarantine itself felt commonplace and ordinary. It was already part of the collective everyday experience. The life portraits in *Homemade* capture a looking glass version of everyday life in quarantine, providing a staged and edited representation of reality carefully told through filmmakers' cinematic and editing choices. Thus, viewers engage ironically with *Homemade*, turning to streaming services during times of boredom to consume media representations of others' portrayals of the same banality. Thus, quarantine becomes a tangential dilemma to the film narratives.

Considering the Banal during the Pandemic

Much of Baudrillard's later work is concerned with banality, or the nondescript elements of everyday life. To understand how banality is relevant as a lens through which to view *Homemade*, it is important to address how quarantine itself exemplifies the banal. The series

showcases an intense fascination with such remediation of daily life and the mundanity of actions like digital communication, sleeping, cooking, and cleaning. Baudrillard suggests, "At a time when television and the media in general are less and less capable of accounting for (rendre compte) the world's (unbearable) events, they rediscover daily life" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.). There have been 52.2 million cases of COVID-19 and the virus has killed 1.2 million people at the time of this writing ("COVID-19"). To say the trauma of the pandemic feels unbearable is an understatement. While the media has worked to be "capable of accounting for" this pandemic, the masses' "desire for the spectacle of banality" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.) brings about media like *Homemade* that remediates daily life. Indeed, news media provided near constant pandemic coverage, and coverage is still abundant in the latter months of 2020. As Kip Kline writes in his analysis of Baudrillard, "The proliferation of screens and information overload beget an increasingly banal world" (81). As viewers engage with others' experiences of the banal and representations of reality within quarantine, they further increase their own experiences as real. Despite their manufactured nature, the careful representations found in *Homemade* are sites through which viewers can see themselves and their own realities. Thus, reality's representation influences viewers' perception of reality within their own experiences, as if they were also representations.

2020 brought an overwhelming increase of information streaming through screens, much of which represents the hyperreal and the banal. Watching *Homemade*, the audience is invited into such representations as the voyeur. Baudrillard once described people's relationship with banality, "people are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by this indifferent 'nothing-to-say' or 'nothing-to-do,' by the indifference of their own lives" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.). We might also borrow from Baudrillard's consideration of boredom in

relation to the idea of vacation to show how quarantine inspires the banal. While quarantine is not a vacation, it is a break from our typical daily lives and, for many, a break from typical work-life. Baudrillard writes, "...vacation is predestined to boredom, along with the bitter and triumphant premonition of being unable to escape it" ("Fatal Strategies" 200). In vacation, boredom is increased by "happiness and recreation" (ibid.). In some cases, quarantine may be associated with increased "happiness and recreation," however it was also a time of stress, struggle, and chaos. Still, there existed a predestiny to boredom as people were limited to specific spatial boundaries, namely their homes. Further, as policies shut down commercial and recreational spaces, the limitations of those boundaries increased, increasing the inability to escape quarantine's boredom. Baudrillard argues people seek boredom as a means of "fatal diversion" (ibid.), and this statement takes on new meaning when considered within the pandemic's context. People seek out image and spectacle, like those provided by the media, to achieve diversion.

Creating *Homemade*

The films' content ranges from filmmakers' personal narratives and their families' daily lives in quarantine to fictional tales, some of which are told as if the characters are also quarantined. The genre of these films follows a diverse lineage of production techniques, especially those that amplify everyday and amateur voices. Within this we can include trends like social media, home video, reality TV, and photo and video essays, which can be created by ordinary users often with no special authority or access to traditional production-quality tools and software. The films were created with small teams that sometimes included filmmakers' family members due to lockdown restrictions. Some filmmakers included actors and production crew outside their immediate household following social distancing protocols.

Brief information about how films were made, including who was involved, where it was filmed, and what technology was employed is listed by filmmakers at the end of each film, although not all information is listed for each film. For instance, director Ladj Ly, whose film is the first episode, wrote, "This Homemade film was shot in Clichy-Montfermeil in Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the French departments that suffered the most from the pandemic. The character Buzz, with his drone, allowed us to respect the social distancing measures" ("Clichy-Montfermeil," translated from the French). Another filmmaker, Sebastián Lelio, writes, "This homemade Musical was filmed by me with a phone along with the actress and a team formed by two family members, both with no previous filmmaking experience" ("Algoritmo"). These two examples exemplify the films' connection to a social situation mired in the reproduction of reality and the banal.

Critic Eric Kohn called *Homemade*, "a lively, scattershot collage of the world in 2020," yet even this collage, the fictional and non-fictional episodes of *Homemade*, must be understood as representations of reality. As media scholar David Buckingham writes,

> By definition, media do not offer us a transparent 'window on the world', but a mediated version of it. They don't just present reality, but re-present it. Media representations therefore inevitably invite us to see the world in some particular ways and not others. They are bound to be biased rather than objective. (n.p.)

We therefore must understand *Homemade*'s limitations to truthfully depict life in 2020. Documentary and fictitious episodes are constructed through the creative team's vision. The construction of reality is thus a series of decisions made by this team, who decides what to write, record, and silence in addition to how to edit the narrative, invoking principles of montage (Eisenstein) and considerations about what to include and exclude. For instance,

Rachel Morrison's short film "The Lucky Ones," episode three in *Homemade*, shares her hopes for what her 5-year-old will remember of his experience living through the pandemic. The film uses images and video of her son experiencing quarantine's happier moments. In the narration however, Morrison admits there are downsides to quarantine, like her son missing his friends. Yet images of her son upset remain missing from the film. Indeed, Morrison's title, "The Lucky Ones," points to the line between the inclusion and omission of her son's the day-to-day life experience, and seems to target experiences of gratitude over hardship.

Additionally, the films are crafted into efficient narratives, told on tight timelines, implying considerable editing at the filmmakers' hands. Decisions about scripting, filming, and editing consequently limit and define the narrative for audiences, and serve to remind us no story can be retold completely. Episode 11, "Mayroun and the Unicorn" by Nadine Labaki and Khaled Mouzanar tells the story of a young girl's (Mayroun) playmaking and imaginative storytelling. Mayroun Mouzanar, who plays herself in the film, is not credited as a writer, even though the story apparently follows her imaginative storytelling. This leads to speculation about whether the narrative was indeed improvised or scripted. This dissolution between the reality of the character and actor as well as between the reality and its representation within the storyline points to the hyperreal. Further, the film makes significant use of jump cuts, which assists in forming the film's short timeframe. The obvious cuts might help to increase the flow of the young girl's narrative arc, but it simultaneously reminds audiences that reality's representation is manipulated. Ultimately, what is depicted within *Homemade* is a reflection of reality, a representation of a representation.

Understanding *Homemade* as Representation

Benjamin argues "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and

humanly" drives the force behind reproduction (45). Everyone experienced the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in unique ways, influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors connected to specific location and politics governing that location. Thus, people sought to bring "closer" others' experiences of quarantine to highlight the similar but different circumstances of people around the world. The international films in *Homemade* capture such closure "spatially and humanly." While those watching *Homemade* from home experienced the pandemic through their unique perspectives and circumstances, the films bring a temporal and location-based experience to shape a larger pandemic narrative. They will further serve to connect viewers to the past as lockdown requirements shift, but always through a distance created by the screen's presence and a semblance of reproduction. Benjamin writes, "in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced," thus contributing to a sense of distance between the original and the reproduction (44). To Benjamin, the sensory experiences of viewing art are not merely physical, but also historical, and transform with humanity's existence. A physical spatial distance between the films' events and the space viewers watch them from still exists, along with a temporal space. With these changes come perspective and contextual changes as well. The distance between the original work and the viewer is part of the object's aura and the sensory experience. As representation calls attention to this distance, it also calls forth its authenticity. Benjamin argues the aura is tied to an understanding of authenticity: "the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value" (45). Moving from Benjamin to Baudrillard, authenticity becomes even more complex, as Baudrillard points to a dissolution between reality and representations of reality, to the point

where representation precedes reality and influences people to perceive representations as authentic.

Baudrillard furthers the discrepancy between original and reproduction Benjamin first highlighted by suggesting that the ability to determine an original from the reproduction is no longer possible, and has in fact entered, hyperreality. Baudrillard posited that hyperreality displaces reality as reproductions are generated "by models of a real without origin or reality," (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). The hyperreal is thus a simulacrum, a copy without an original. Viewers watching *Homemade* are experiencing reproductions of the films rather than originals, which, following Baudrillard's theory, do not exist. Because of this lack of distinction, viewers experience reality and simulation within the same experience. As John Storey writes, "representation does not stand at one remove from reality, to conceal or distort, it is reality" (190). The idea that representation is reality is especially pertinent to *Homemade*.

In *Crickets* (episode 14), filmmaker Kristen Stewart offers a curiously apt commentary about working on the films: "Art that is born of restriction has a way of becoming itself in a surprising and cosmic sort of way" (Menta n.p.). Stewart's comment further condenses the distinction between reality and representation by suggesting that the cultural, economic, and technological reality of the film's creation "[becomes] itself" in the work. The text at the film's end explains: "This Homemade film was made at home(s). By a couple people maintaining social distance" ("Crickets"). Stewart wrote, directed, and starred in" Crickets," a common trend within *Homemade* and representative of lockdown restrictions put in place across the world. The title comes from the oppressive sound of crickets keeping Stewart's character awake at night. Notably, Stewart's character doesn't have a name. Rather, audiences watch as Stewart, presumably playing a character, enacts the plot of the film. Here again, viewers

contemplate hyperreality. Is the character Stewart herself or is she playing a role? Is this Stewart's quarantine experience or is this any time? Stewart does not mention quarantine during the short film, unlike many other episodes. She does, however, open and close with the character's assertion that she needs a break presumably from the annoying sound of the crickets. Metaphorically, we could associate this break with quarantine, which gave people a break from their familiar daily lives. Alternatively, this could be associated with a break from the monotony of quarantine.

Stewart's film makes a useful case study for understanding how content and filmmaking processes represent quarantine experiences in ways that lead to understanding these films as hyperreal. In *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard calls attention to the distinction between "rubbish" and a "work of art" at play in Duchamp's "Fountain." He then suggests media can also "[open] on to a generalized virtuality which puts an end to the real by its promotion of every single instant" (29). Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality has also shown the dissolution of the distinction between reality and reproduction, which he furthers through a consideration of the destruction of the real through the promotion of the banal. While *Homemade* opens a door to the unique experiences and imaginations of filmmakers, they also present viewers with a picture of banality. This trend is long-coming, considering Baudrillard's trajectory of research. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues, "The cinema in its current efforts is getting closer and closer, and with greater and greater perfection, to the absolute real, in its banality, its veracity, in its naked obviousness, in its boredom, and at the same time in its presumption, in its pretension to being the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the craziest of undertakings…" (30). Baudrillard additionally turns such discussion on the medium of television.

As an audio-visual medium, the becoming-itself-ness Stewart acknowledges within such quarantine films bring about a connection to Baudrillard's argument of the world "becoming-image" in its hyperreality. He writes, "Television inculcates indifference, distance, scepticism and unconditional apathy. Through the world's becoming-image, it anesthetizes the imagination, provokes a sickened abreaction, together with a surge of adrenalin which induces total disillusionment" (*The Illusion of the End* 61). Later, in his discussion of reality TV, Baudrillard suggests such television points to the masses' "[profound] desire for a spectacle of banality," which he characterizes as "nothingness, insignificance, and flatness" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.). While the films in *Homemade* do not fit within the genre of reality television, it is worth comparing Baudrillard's exploration of banality to the series, as they work as a "transposition of an 'everyday life'" where "the televisual universe is merely a holographic detail of the global reality" (ibid.) The banal in *Homemade* becomes especially apparent in its documentary shorts, but is additionally apparent in the fictitious works, like Stewart's *Crickets* detailed above; Pablo Larraín's *Last Call*, which focuses on a man in a nursing home video conferencing with an ex-girlfriend; and Rungano Nyoni's *Couple Splits Up While In Lockdown LOL*, which details the dissolution and resolution of a couple's relationship through a series of texts between the couple and their friends.

In these latter two examples, we again see Stewart's comment about art "born of restriction...becoming itself" (Menta, n.p.). The technologies through which the stories are told are significant communication technologies associated with the quarantine and social distancing restrictions as they enable people to maintain communication with one another. Yet, in and of themselves, as mediums of communication, they are banal. To then compose narratives around these mediums, increasingly showcases "the art of restriction...becoming

itself" as well as the "promotion of every single instant." As William Merrin writes, quoting Baudrillard, "Truth raised to its highest level becomes banal in its obviousness, reducing us to a stupefied acceptance that destroys our relationship to it and thus its 'ring of truth' (*Cool Memories* (CM) 118)" (40). And while video conferencing and texting are seen as ordinary by today's standards, they further represent Baudrillard's claim that "the cinematic illusion fade[s] as technical prowess increase[s]" (*The Perfect Crime* 30). Baudrillard makes this comment about the development of reality TV and the feeling of the camera seeming always-on and supposedly capturing *everything* happening. Yet, the feeling is apt considering the use of video conferencing and text messaging in lieu of "the cinematic illusion." both seemingly remove the mysteriousness from the artistic creation process since audiences are aware of the recording medium and technological boundaries are built into the films' frameworks. In *The Last Call*, the audience is aware of watching computer screens, and in *Couple Splits Up While In Lockdown LOL*, the audience is aware of watching a cell phone. Baudrillard insists the media "[take] on themselves the triumphant illusion of the world of communications, the whole ambiguity of mass culture, the confusion of ideologies, the stereotypes, the spectacle, the banality" (*The Illusion of the End* 61). The machines' presence intervenes with the audience's ability to read the films with an ambiance of illusion, promoting the hyperreal and the banal.

It is worth unpacking these two examples further, to understand how such choices remove "the cinematic illusion." In *The Last Call*, the visuals focus on the actors' computer cameras whether placed individually on screen or side by side. Here, viewers can consider the computer cameras in the same way Baudrillard considered the cameras in the filming of reality TV programming, at least insofar as they are expected to believe the cameras are capturing *real* scenes. They continuously capture the conversations and reactions of the actors, without the

illusion of different framing or the editing of the story. In *Couple Splits Up While In Lockdown LOL* the only video footage used is supposedly real-time screen-captures of the couples' text messages and social media. The film is shot vertically so audiences imagine they are looking at a cellphone. Again, in the context of the story, we are expected to believe this footage is real. The use of these mediums and the apparent use of personal media like cellphones as recording devising in other episodes help remediate (Bolter and Grusin) quarantine into the films themselves, an act of the world "becoming-image" through "the representation of one medium in another" (45). In remediating communication technologies as cinematic practices, these films remediate the act of maintaining social networks during quarantine.

Conclusion

Baudrillard's lengthy career spanned the later half of the 20th Century and into the first decade of the 21st. His postmodern critical media theory still speaks to and influences readings of new cinematic works today. If this trend holds true, Baudrillard will remain a germinal media scholar who provides a distinct context through which to analyze and evaluate media and the world around us. Today, just as when Baudrillard first suggested it, the dissolution between reality and representation can be found throughout culture, leading to questions about the gap between art and the banal. Quarantine has increased audiences' "[profound] desire for a spectacle of banality" ("Dust Breeding" n.p.). *Homemade* helps fulfill this desire by at once reminding viewers of the home videos and reality TV they previously consumed and providing narratives through which viewers can imagine themselves as participants in the ordinary and banal. In the films, hyperreality and banality surface as striking elemental factors that viewers may engage with on a daily basis without giving much thought to the representations of such reality. Here, Zoom and text are mediated narrative devices; children's play and household

chores are made worthy of being told through story. These everyday procedures and experiences amplify the ordinary to the level of spectacle. By considering how this series remediates and represents the social, cultural, physical, and economic realities of quarantine, *Homemade* reminds viewers that in an age of increased information, banality is all around us.

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Baudrillard and the Prophetic: Reimagining the Twin Towers in *Avengers: Infinity War*

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Abstract

After 9/11, Jean Baudrillard proclaimed that the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center (the Twin Towers) in New York City, would enter the imaginary space, that: "Even in their pulverized state… No one who knew them can cease imagining them …Their end in material space has borne them off into a definite imaginary space…" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 36-37). This can now be considered a prophetic statement, not just in the realm of the human memory, a geographical imagination, but in the imaginary spaces of film. The Twin Towers are reimagined and revealed in presence and absence (maps and territories of the Real). They are present and have an origin story in Robert Zemeckis' resurrection narrative *The Walk*, where the high-wire walk by Philippe Petite was credited with "giving them a soul." They are present in their absence in the New York City skyline in Joseph Kosinski's *Oblivion*. However, it is in Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War* that the ruined and ghostly remains of the Twin Towers are reimagined, returning to haunt audiences on the screen, associated with one of the key plot elements, the Soul Stone, and its need for sacrifice. *Avengers: Infinity War* reimagines the Twin Towers as an architectural marker for the Soul Stone. To receive the stone, a sacrifice must be made of the beloved other, consistent with the history of the Twin Towers. What is the metaphoric transmission that their inclusion serves? This paper seeks to demonstrate the transmission of real-world trauma through Baudrillard's works and his prophetic utterance on the destruction of the World Trade Center Twin Towers that is fulfilled in the psychoanalytic geography of New York City through the filmic medium. In the film, *Avengers: Infinity War*, the

events of 9/11 are reconstructed. The Twin Towers are re-represented to perform as architectural markers conveying the hypnotic aspects of terrorism that form the narrative support to the scene on the planet Vormir.

Keywords
Baudrillard, Avengers, Twin Towers, New York, 9/11, terrorism, Lacan, Žižek, anamorphosis

In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard prophesised and foreshadowed that the real-world trauma of the events of 9/11, symbolized by the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center (Twin Towers), would enter imaginary spaces: "Even in their pulverized state… No one who knew them can cease imagining them …Their end in material space has borne them off into a definite imaginary space…" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 36-37). This can now be considered a prophetic statement, not just in the realm of human memory, a geographical imagination, or in the New York skyline, but in the imaginary spaces of film. The Twin Towers are reimagined and revealed in presence and absence (maps and territories of the Real). It is in the filmic medium that the inclusion of the Twin Towers and the events of 9/11 are appropriated in themes and images (present or absent), and/or as narrative support.

In *Avengers: Infinity War*,[1] the Twin Towers have left their original material space and place and have been borne off into the imaginary space of the planet Vormir. The towers are reimagined and exhumed as ruins that preside over a terrorist exchange of "a soul for a soul." The event's narrative is reimagined on an apocalyptic planet in a manifestation of Baudrillard's prophetic imaginary, which becomes a space for the towers. Adding to this imaginary space is the psychoanalytic framing that occurs in the shot that is staging an anamorphic stain: a dark blot (the shadow of death), similar to the approaching planes on 9/11 that appeared against a backdrop of the looming towers.

Since 9/11, the apocalyptic image of the destruction of the Twin Towers has evoked "the spirit of terrorism" (Baudrillard *Spirit of Terrorism*). The absence of the Twin Towers on the New York City skyline is a constant reminder that places them in an imagined presence. This "absolute event" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 17), as Baudrillard describes it, was both outside and inside the imagination, as represented by New York City's changing landscape and its place in "disaster" films.

On 9/11, the filmic dream that contained imagined disasters and alien worlds (a map) folded under the real destruction of the Twin Towers (the territory). This shock of a real disaster underpins New York City being featured prominently, due to its skyscrapers, in cinematic imaginary disaster history (Feldman 26). Since 9/11, these two realities have merged in Baudrillard's "desert of the real," now that the map can be discerned from the real territory (of trauma) (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Baudrillard considered that the Twin Towers in "their pulverized state… have left behind an intense awareness of their presence" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 48). However, this is more than a claim that they survive in memory, he also affirmed that their destruction had "borne them off into a definite imaginary space" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 48). Film finds new ways to engage with the Twin Towers.

This paper considers how the Twin Towers have entered the imaginary in the filmic space of cinema, making Baudrillard's utterance prophetic. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory assists in an explanation of how the film, *Avengers: Infinity War*, traps us in its filmic representation as the anamorphic stain is reimagined. The metaphoric transmission concerns the "architecture" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 37) of the Twin Towers because they are objects, that since 9/11, are "stuck to us" (Morton 36).[2]

Baudrillard's Prophetic Shadow of the Twin Towers - Imaginary Space

For Jean Baudrillard, New York City has mapped its history through its architecture. But in the case of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, something unique in the history of buildings took place. They were architectural doubles imprinting on the New York skyline and dominating it. Baudrillard explains: "The fact that there were two of them signifies the end of original reference… only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates [and] a particular fascination in this duplication" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 39).

On 9/11 the Twin Towers were transformed into an ethereal dust that has manifested as a psychological ghost haunting both the geo-space of New York City and the imagination. Baudrillard insists that the Twin Towers have left an indelible presence on the New York skyline that terrorism cannot erase. Because they have entered the imaginary space, the Twin Towers cast a shadow that aligns with the trauma of their passing. On 9/11, the Twin Towers were no longer the setting of an imaginary New York disaster film, the uncanny images were broadcast live, and by some viewers seen as something unbelievable and therefore filmic. The Twin Towers became the manifestation of every disaster film ever played out in New York City. In these images of the collapsing World Trade Center Towers Baudrillard insists, is the "Spirit of Terrorism… the violence of the real, in an allegedly virtual universe" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 13, 21). The disturbance of this 'absolute event', has left traces on the virtual world, an irruption of the Real, that is captured in images, and transferred in the filmic medium.

Vormir: The Geospatial (Space for) the Setting for the Towers in *Avengers: Infinity War*

In his search for the Soul Stone, the key antagonist, Thanos discovers that his daughter Gamora knows its location. In the film's timeline, years ago, Gamora had discovered a map that she destroyed to prevent Thanos from discovering the stone. As Thanos tortures Gamora's sister,

Nebula, he finds in her memory the truth of Gamora's concealment. To save Nebula from further torture, Gamora must lead Thanos to the location of the stone on planet Vormir.

Thanos and Gamora arrive on Vormir to an eclipse that casts a shadow over everything. As they ascend the mountain, they see the summit through a crevice. Glimpsed through this cavern, two towers can be seen. From the darkness emerges a figure, floating mid-air and calling them by name. As this shadowy apparition fully reveals itself, it is Red Skull.

The last time Red Skull was onscreen, he was a terrorist who disappeared while attempting to drop a bomb on New York City in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. He disappeared through an opening created by the Space Stone. The return of this character is not a causal adoption in the film. He is a terrorist and that he should now live on Vormir, cast into the role of caretaker/guide for the Soul Stone, and dwelling in the shadow of the Twin Towers, is an interesting twist.

When Thanos demands the Soul Stone, Red Skull replies that taking the stone will exact a terrible price. They walk between the towers, and from the opposite angle the audience can see that snow has landed on the ruins, the white sections giving the appearance of lit windows in skyscrapers.

Looking out over a precipice between these Twin Towers, Red Skull explains the price for the Soul Stone is sacrificing that which you love. Gamora derides Thanos in what she assumes is his failure, as she judges him as loving no one, but he loves her. In tears, Thanos pays the price for the stone, throwing Gamora to her death from between the towers. Gamora's body can be seen laid out on the etched ground / 'pavement' after the fall from the towers. This sacrifice of the beloved other releases two beams of light that travel straight in the air with an

explosion. Thanos awakens in the water where he and Gamora had arrived on the planet, he lifts his hand and sees the Soul Stone. The terrorist exchange is complete, "a soul" for the Stone.

Baudrillard and the Shadows of Lacan

Baudrillard's prophetic imaginary space, and his "spectre of terrorism" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 62) are made visible in the scene on Vormir. This reimagines the Twin Towers with the inclusion of Red Skull; this is where the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan offers some insight. Jacques Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* notes the shadowy object in Hans Holbein's painting of the Ambassadors, as "a trap for the gaze" (89). The symbolic identification of the two young men undermined by the death's head, the anamorphic shadow. In the following, Lacan describes the appearance of the young men, and the effect of the anamorphosis:

> What, then, before this display of the domain of appearance in all its most fascinating forms, is this object… which appears to be flying through the air- you apprehend in this form… What? A skull. (88)

This representation in the painting is the anamorphosis,[3] the dark blot that draws in the viewer. On the planet Vormir, Red Skull manifests as an anamorphosis, an ethereal ghost, the dark blot, as the phantasm of death. A literal spirit of terrorism haunting the towers as the custodian of the traumatic imagination. His appearance creates a pairing with the towers (like Holbein's painting) and is a reimaging of 9/11 through a psychoanalytic lens. In the 9/11 event, following Lacan's explanation of the anamorphosis, Slavoj Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* considered the planes hitting the towers as "the Hitchcockian blot, the anamorphic stain which denaturalized the idyllic well-known New York landscape" (15). This psychoanalytic reading of the events in New York City on 9/11, that denaturalised the landscape, reappears on Vormir to re-stage in the filmic image the terrorist exchange.

In *Avengers: Infinity War*, the pairing of the towers with the floating figure of Red Skull is an allegory. Baudrillard claimed that on 9/11 the images engaged audiences in fascination and that "the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror… not only is it terrifying… it is real" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 22). The scene on Vormir, superadds the real to the image by hijacking the viewer's memory in the images of 9/11 and the collapse of the Twin Towers. The representation has a similar purpose for a 21st-century audience as Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. The audience is drawn into the film by the representation of the towers as symbolic objects, with the black blotch as the anamorphosis, floating toward us on the screen.

In Oliver Stone's film *World Trade Center*, the planes hitting the Twin Towers were left out, in favor of the shadow of the plane on the side of New York City's buildings. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, Red Skull's spectral form is the manifestation of the shadow of the planes on 9/11, and literally the spirit of terrorism. Baudrillard explains that the spirit of terrorism consists in the death exchange (*Spirit of Terrorism* 14) and in the film Red Skull states the requirement of "a soul for the stone." This symbolic act of death was performed on 9/11, collapsing the symbolic exceptionalism of America. In this instance, this exceptionalism is represented by the Avengers, and Thanos is the terrorist who humiliates these American heroes.

After Gamora's death, twin beams of light emanate from the towers that are reminiscent of the 'Tribute in Light' in New York. These lights substituted the missing towers as well as performing as a marker for the lost souls of 9/11. On the planet Vormir, the Twin Towers sit as ruined monoliths, not destroyed but not quite whole either. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, the characters walking between these reimagined Twin Towers are like the promotional poster for Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*. There is also an overhead shot looking down from the top of the towers in a Phillipe-Petite-type view of a reimagined World Trade Center Plaza. These are

not causal associations. The appearance of the Twin Towers in *Avengers: Infinity War* is reminiscent of familiar imagery of their dominance and place in New York City as architectural markers in the skyline. Just as the Marvel Cinematic Universe requires prior knowledge to make sense of this film, the Twin Towers function phenomenologically for a viewing audience.

Baudrillard, Mapping the Metaphoric Shadow and Film

The location of the Soul Stone on the planet Vormir is mapped in memory. Traumatic memory is the subtext of the film, because the Twin Towers and 9/11 are thematic signifiers, a device that casts a metaphoric shadow over the film. This is reinforced by using the geography of New York City throughout the rest of the film. The location of infinity stones is an interplay of "hidden geography" (Feldman 35). Thus, the film engages Baudrillard's claims in *The Spirit of Terrorism* and in *Simulacra and Simulation*. The Soul Stone is found on Vormir because of the map that exists in Gamora's memory which is like the Twin Towers that only exist in the imagination and/or memory. They are no longer visible. The film becomes a map of the territory of 9/11, the reappearance of the architectural markers that suggests to the audience the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

When dealing with subtexts of 9/11, the audience engages with Baudrillard's prophetic exemplified in film's psychoanalytic geography. Film and other art forms respond to 9/11 as representations that are mediated by revision, restaging, and retelling, through tropes, subtexts, and allegories that are casting a metaphorical shadow, a presence in absence. Some further examples of this occur outside the specific representation on the planet Vormir in the film. The Hulk traverses the space above Ground Zero when he is transported to Earth (New York City) through dark magic in the form of a light beam. As he streams across Ground Zero, the change in New York City's spatial universe, its geography, is tangible and mediating the absence of the

Twin Towers. The appropriation of 9/11 imagery, in the absence of the Twin Towers, continues after the arrival of The Hulk to warn the Avengers that the terrorist "Thanos is coming," followed by the arrival of a spaceship. This craft belongs to Ebony Maw, Thanos' emissary of prophetic doom. Hovering above the streets of New York City, it causes flying debris with bystanders screaming and running. This scene serves as the particularity of "the spirit of terrorism...the absolute, irrevocable event" (Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism* 13) that is retold. New York City in a repetition of the trauma of 9/11 is under terrorist attack. According to Baudrillard, these filmic experiences are a type of exorcism by "images and special effects" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 34). The backstory of Maw's coming to New York City to acquire the Time Stone affirms that terrorism can steal time. This is the key feature of Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, that the trauma of 9/11 makes time stand still (3); other Avengers characters, elsewhere in the world, see a TV screen with the headline 'Breaking News: New York Attacked,' reinforcing and replaying the global nature of the disaster and its traumatic transmission.

The Metaphoric Transmission: Revisions in Representation, Falling Woman

Synonymous with the events of 9/11, and the Twin Towers, is another image that 'sticks' and is a representational taboo—that of people falling, tumbling, or jumping from the Towers. Richard Drew's image, famously known as "Falling Man," and the sculpture *Tumbling Woman* are embodiments of what was considered "inappropriate" for public viewing (Engle 16). Terence McSweeney's claim on the taboo of cinematic representations of the planes hitting the Towers is relevant in these images of falling (2-3). Karen Engle uses the notion of exposure and concealment, presence, and absence as "unsettling the borderlines between life and death" (16). In its revision of the 9/11 event, *Avengers: Infinity War* uses the character of Gamora as a

metaphor in a composite representation, a "Falling Woman." Again, there is that sense of absence: the audience sees the start of the fall, and the aftermath, but the moment of "collision" is lost to editing / darkness.

As Baudrillard proclaimed, the Twin Towers can never be removed from the New York skyline; they and we are trapped in never ceasing to imagine them. The appearance of the Twin Towers in the film evokes, steals, or borrows the apprehension of disaster because they are already in the viewer's psyche. This is strengthened by using the ruins of the Twin Towers in a filmic representation on the planet Vormir, that reimagines their original dominant place in New York. They are shot looking up, and slightly off-center. The aspect of them looming above is achieved in a type of staging of the originals, pre-destruction. It is a ghastly apparition because of its sudden and unexpected appearance on Vormir with the knowledge of their disappearance from the New York City skyline. This captures the essence of Baudrillard's prophetic statement. The iconic buildings, because of their disappearance on 9/11, cause "a rupture in the perceptual field" (Lentricchia and McAuliffe 5) as they are caught in the cinematic mirror.

New York City dwells in the cinematic mirror, along with its iconic buildings. As such it has become a performance stage, a void that can be filled with imagined fantasies played out as well as in representational violence (Haywood 32). Even before Phillipe Petit made his high wire walk in the void between the Twin Towers, it had been the backdrop for countless films. As Feldman notes, there is an "imaginary disaster history of the New York skyline" (33), but this imaginary is intersected by the changing nature of the city itself. *Avengers: Infinity War* takes the Twin Towers as imaginary props that ensure a connection with terrorism, hostages, apocalypse, trauma, falling and death. Baudrillard claimed that New York City's architecture "throughout its history, tracked the form of the system" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 31). Christoph Lindner considers

that "since the rise of the modern skyscraper, Manhattan has always been caught somewhere between the sublime and the uncanny" (25). It is a territory that has been mapped by cinema.

Have the imaginary spaces of cinema been literally eclipsed by the real thing in the 9/11 event? *Avengers: Infinity War* relies on our own memory and the maps of our own souls confronted by the Real of death on 9/11. What better way to describe the apparition of Red Skull on Vormir, as the haunting death figure of asymmetrical terrorism. This imaginary space of cinema uses the towers as a symbolic referent to something that has borne off our souls through the 9/11 event that was "as real as death" (Redfield 56).

Various films have found new ways and methods to engage with the 9/11 event, and more specifically the Twin Towers. Watching post-9/11 films like *The Walk* and *Oblivion*, for example, the viewer's memory is part of the film, drawing us in through the gaze of the object. McGowan (*The Real Gaze* 5) claims that the object of the film itself looks back at us. Some post 9/11films that use the Twin Towers exemplify what can be considered as Baudrillard's Prophetic, the persistence of their presence or present through their absence, in the imaginary spaces of film.

Resurrection Narrative: *The Walk*

Zemeckis' film, *The Walk* goes back in time, returning to the last stages of the completion of the building of the Twin Towers. This nostalgic turn restores the place and space where the Twin Towers stood as a type of resurrection. He reproduces the Twin Towers in their imaginary wholeness, to fill the void left by their destruction. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard claims "When the real is no longer what it was nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origins and of signs of reality…" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6). *The Walk*

imagines for the viewer the Twin Towers in their original and perfect state, at the beginning of their creation narrative when they were given a soul by Phillipe Petite.

Philippe Petite (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is placed in the narrative as a type of Christ figure in a miracle story. The followers in his "coup" exemplify a naïve purity, in assuring the performance of a walk on a wire between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. In their planning and executing of the "coup," they subverted the law and created a singular never-to-be repeated event. Philippe refers to this performance space as "the void." This film is more than a memorial, it subtly invites a comparison with the terrorist attack and engages with the fascination of looking up at the looming towers, a situation repeated on 9/11.

The film situates itself simultaneously as a "second coming" and birth narrative of the Twin Towers. *The Walk* is nostalgic fantasy, an attempt to breathe life back into the souls of New Yorkers like Art Spiegelman who are living in the shadow of no towers.

Absence and Ashes: *Oblivion*

Baudrillard's prophetic is exemplified in Kosinski's science fiction fantasy film *Oblivion.* The film uses the iconic and recognisable architecture of the Empire State Building to amplify the absence of the Twin Towers to the viewer. It accentuates looking and seeing absence. A set of binoculars on the observation deck of the Empire State building invite the audience to see the void in the New York skyline where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center once stood (Haywood 32). This is Baudrillard's claim that "[n]o one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all parts of the city" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 36). These reflections by Baudrillard and the accent on the void in the skyline, aligns with E. Ann Kaplan's personal account of the architecture of the Twin Towers. She states that "for those nearby, the towers functioned phenomenologically as part of people's spatial universe" (100).

Kosinski uses iconic architecture from New York City, in the dream and flashback sequences, in a phenomenological manner to convey a sense of the object, memory, nostalgia, and direct experience. The iconic geography of the New York skyline is reinforced by Kosinski's use in the film of "the ruins of the Empire State Building to intensify their functioning as a type of embodiment of personal loss … and the subtext of the loss of the Twin Towers" (Haywood 38).

Oblivion insists on absence as an overarching metaphor for 9/11. The geospatial attempt at mapping the Towers cannot find a reference in the New York skyline because it is a reflected absence (Haywood), in memory, shadow and imagination. The individual confronted by the Real of death on 9/11 finds that confrontation impossible. Baudrillard claimed that the destruction of the Twin Towers was "a situation science fiction dreamed of from the beginning …some obscure force would wipe them out" (*Spirit of Terrorism* 48). *Oblivion* as a science fiction film fulfils this brief in the alien known as "Sally." In the flashes of a devastated earth, after her attack, recognisable buildings such as the Pentagon heighten the associations with 9/11. *Oblivion* uses the ruined skyscrapers of New York City in images of ruins of the territory, then overlays Jack's (Tom Cruise) memory flashbacks, to the earth before the war. This type of metaphor is for before 9/11. Jack's memories serve as a psychoanalytical geographical map for New York City. The view from the Empire State Building maps for the audience the missing Twin Towers in their place and space in the New York skyline. Aligning with Baudrillard's claims in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, that the Twin Towers were clones, the character of Jack Harper serves as metaphorical transmission. Jack Harper has been cloned, only the image of his pulverized state remains as he is reduced to dust and DNA. At the end of the film, only Jack's image remains, as a clone, not the authentic subject (Haywood 40).

Like *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Oblivion* superadds the Real (Baudrillard *Spirit of Terrorism* 22) to the filmic image. It is engaging with Baudrillard's theory of "the desert of the real… the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map…" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). In the New York skyline the filmic map of the Twin Towers subsists in the "desert of the real," and makes the representation of absence now discernible.

Psychoanalytic Geography in Baudrillard's Prophetic: The Shredding of the Map, the Territory of Space and Time, the Desert of the Real and Reproduction

Horror and the disaster film have mapped the soul of America and in cinema, have extended to Western society as a whole. But post 9/11, with its geospatial universe in ruins and the map incinerated (similarly to the plot of *Avengers: Infinity War*), "the deserts [that] are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the Real itself*" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Žižek considers that in New York on September 11, "citizens were introduced to 'the desert of the Real'—for us corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions" (15). Feldman considered that on September 11, "[r]eality shattered referential time and space, and yet an image sequence was created, deeply anchored in a residual cinematics of history" (28).

Baudrillard's prophetic vision in the repetition of the image of the Twin Towers both alerts and disrupts the audience through cinema's imaginary space. This doubling of the image (the map and the territory), in cinema and memory makes a map of the territory of 9/11 where the Real Twin Towers have been destroyed. The geography of the absence of the destroyed Twin Towers and the image of their reappearance is like the dual layer of "the mind and the city" (Freud 8). The psychoanalytic geography of New York City has been conquered by the

imaginary space of a virtual consciousness. The territory of the geographical and absent space of the Twin Towers has entered the imaginary space because terrorism created a map that exactly overlayed the territory in the Real of terrorist violence. Representations are trapped in a continual mapping of the trauma of 9/11 in film. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, this irruption is seen in the return of Lacan's anamorphosis.

Conclusion

Yet again, Baudrillard has proven his relevance and worth in revealing and speaking prophetically to present-day theories of human reality. Reimaging the Twin Towers in *Avengers: Infinity War* is a displacement of time and space, but not of subject. The film re-enacts 9/11 adopted as a "a cultural prosthesis" (Feldman 34). Re-imagining the Twin Towers in Baudrillard's prophetic sense in *Avengers: Infinity War* exceeds the image while using 9/11 as a narrative text. The scene on Vormir (re)introduces the ruined towers; it traps the viewer in asymmetrical terrorism (Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* 12), and we are caught in a representation of a shadow—an anamorphosis. Red Skull is the blot or stain that turns into a figure set against the backdrop of the Twin Towers. Like the shadows of the planes on New York City's buildings in the film *World Trade Center*, there is a foreshadowing of death and destruction through manifesting the "spirit of terrorism."

Avengers: Infinity War is not just Baudrillard's imaginary space, in a limited sense of the imagination, it is a revision of that space as a revisited psychoanalytic geography, echoing in cosmic spaces. The manifestation of "hidden geographies"[4] (Feldman 35) on Vormir is contrasted with the representation of psychoanalytic geographies in New York City—the extension of Baudrillard's imaginary space for the Twin Towers.

Avengers: Infinity War demonstrates through iconography and metaphor that in the West, we are trapped in "the spirit of terrorism" and its legacy, which is attached to human vulnerability and mortality. Our symbolic identification aligns with the Twin Towers, as Western markers of commerce, dominance, globalization, and world trade, that became a disturbing witness of death. And yet the Twin Towers, as Baudrillard prophesized, never cease being imagined.

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Notes

[1] Marvel Cinematic Universe films, in various ways, repeat the trauma of 9/11, but this inclusion is not exclusive to this franchise.

[2] Morton describes environmental destruction that is viscose and sticks to everything. This is like the reimagining of the 9/11 event that is functioning the same in film, culture, society, and memory.

[3] For more on the anamorphosis, 9/11 and film, see my paper, "Reflecting Absence, Mediating the Real: Oblivion as a Requiem for 9/11."

[4] Perhaps inter-planetary geography would be a more accurate term.

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Jean Baudrillard and the Challenge of Photography

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Abstract

In the discourses on photography, especially in the Anglo-American context, Jean Baudrillard has been regarded as the prophet of postmodern 'hyperreality.' This article argues for a different view of Baudrillard. By positioning his writings within historical, economic and social realities of the 1970s-1980s France, I argue that his legacy as a theorist and a practitioner of photography is best appraised with reference to his theory of simulacra and his lifelong preoccupation with objects—commodities, technological tools, artefacts, photographs. Considering Baudrillard's theoretical appraisals of photography alongside his photographic practice, the article identifies a number of striking convergences between theory and practice, as well as important divergences, which are further clarified through a study of the photographic works of Baudrillard's contemporaries, French artists Sophie Calle and the artist duo Pierre et Gilles.

Keywords

Baudrillard, photography, Pierre et Gilles, Sophie Calle, object, simulacra

In the discourses on photography, and especially in the Anglo-American context, Jean Baudrillard is often presented as the prophet of "postmodern 'hyperreality'" (Bordwell and Carroll 307), raising doubt over the very existence of objective reality that has been photography's destiny to depict (Wells 75). This article presents a different view of

Baudrillard's relationship with photography. I argue that his legacy as a theorist and a practitioner of photography is best appraised with reference to his theory of simulacra and within the context of historical, economic and social realities of France of the 1970s-1980s that defined his lifelong preoccupation with objects. This reflection saturated his reflection on photography, which he defined as the tool of capturing "the primitive dimension of the object, as opposed to the secondary dimension of the subject and the whole domain of representation" (Baudrillard 33). The aim of the article then, is to contribute to the study of Baudrillard as a theorist and a practitioner of photography, which is an aspect of his work that is only beginning to be appraised in detail (Richon; Coulter; Smith). In the wider context, this article continues the project of authors such as Mike Gane ("Ironies of Postmodernism") and Kim Tofoletti who have argued for a continued significance of Baudrillard for contemporary visual phenomena including photography, which assures the French thinker's enduring 'topicality' (Latouche 18) and 'disturbing influence' (Penot-Lacassagne 15).

My argument is laid out in two parts. The first part offers a historically grounded exposition of Baudrillard's fascination with photography, by relating this interest to his studies of the effect of media and technology on social relations, sociology of consumerism and theorization of simulacra. Through such contextual approach, critical receptions of Baudrillard as a postmodern thinker are exposed as historical constructions. The second part of this paper is dedicated to the study of striking correspondences, as well as notable contradictions and contestations, that exist between Baudrillard's theoretical assumptions about photography and his photographic practice. Photographic works of Baudrillard's contemporaries, French artists Sophie Calle and the artist duo Pierre et Gilles, are identified in this part as offering especially rich juxtapositions with Baudrillard's ideas.

Part 1.

Baudrillard first became interested in photography in the 1980, dedicating a number of essays to an ontological inquiry into the nature of photography. These essays were published, with some delay, in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (1990), *The Perfect Crime* (1995) and *Impossible Exchange* (1999). By the time these essays appeared in print Baudrillard's ideas had already been adopted as the model for a postmodernist exposure of the photographic image as ontologically deceitful. In "Reinventing the Medium" (1999) Rosalind Krauss cited Baudrillard's discourse on simulacra as the proof that "the burgeoning of the copy not only facilitated the quotation of the original but splintered the supposed unity of the original 'itself' into nothing but a series of quotations" (290). As a result of this transformation, she argued, "photography had left behind its identity as a historical or an aesthetic object to become a theoretical object instead" (290). Such interpretations consolidated a view of Baudrillard as the thinker of the postmodern condition that was first promoted in the United States by Douglas Kellner in *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (1989). Such evaluations were made on the basis of translations published in Semiotext(e)'s Foreign Agents series, edited by Sylvère Lotringer (2003) that notably included *Simulations* (1981, translated into English in 1983) and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, the End of the Social and Other Essays* (1978, translated into English in 1983).

Baudrillard himself never used the term postmodernism in relation to his work, including in his writings on photography. In fact, Baudrillard kept equal distance from ideological underpinnings of both modernism and postmodernism (Gane, "Ironies of Postmodernism" 292). The critical reception of Baudrillard as a postmodernist in the Anglo-

American context, then, emerged as a result of a process that François Cusset described as the "'de-nationalisation' of concepts" that accompanied cultural transposition of "French theory" onto the American soil. In the process of this transposition, Cusset argued, ideas expounded by Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari acquired an American identity, having been retooled to respond to the specifics of the American cultural, intellectual and institutional context of the 1980s. The re-nationalisation of Baudrillard's ideas, and specifically ideas concerning photography, proceeds in what follows through positioning them within the context of his lifelong preoccupation with objects—commodities, technological tools, artefacts.

Baudrillard's preoccupation with objects dates back to his early studies of consumerism, which, crucially, were only made available in translation in the late 1990s. Thus, *The System of Objects* (1968) appeared in English in 1996 and *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970) in 1998. His first publication, *The System of Objects*, was dedicated to the study of consumer objects on the basis of the Marxist critique of capitalism and a semiotic methodology that he studied at a seminar led by Roland Barthes at the EHESS (The School for Advanced Studies in the Social Studies in Paris) between 1964 and 1969. Baudrillard soon abandoned Marxist and semiotic frameworks underpinning this text, but his preoccupation with the immanent presence of the object originates in this early research of modern consumer society (Heilbrunn). In this society, the objects reign supreme: In *The Consumer Society,* Baudrillard announced that "the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous stages, but by *objects*" (25). By the early 1980s, when *Fatal Strategies* appeared (1983, translated into English in 1990), the object has come to dominate the human subject completely.

The consumer society Baudrillard describes in these texts was based on a sociological analysis of the newly modernized France and was marked by the acceleration of the global integration of markets for goods and services, facilitated by technological innovations and supported by the further expansion of the European Union and international agreements to barrier-free trade. The Socialist government of François Mitterand, who held the presidency from 1981 to 1995, initially sought to control economic liberalization through nationalization of the banks and industrial enterprises. This commitment was soon withdrawn, and "whilst the state continued to possess a substantial capacity for intervention, multinational corporations, market forces and the imperative need to promote competitiveness in the developing global economy challenged its capacity for autonomous action" (Price 383-384). As a result, the state struggled to provide social support to safeguard the welfare of the citizens, while divisions between wealth categories increased dramatically since 1983 (Garbintia et al.). "Growth neither takes us further from, not brings us closer to, affluence," warned Baudrillard (*The Consumer Society* 53), arguing that poverty is structural to economic growth. His writings furthermore acquire a deeper historical meaning when considering the extent to which world economies had become reliant on speculative market transactions, as dramatically shown by the 1987 stock market crash. At a time when the economy was growing increasingly dependent on immaterial procedures in the form of electronic transfers, Baudrillard announced the emergence of the culture of simulacra, described in *Simulacra and Simulation* as objects and discourses which have no fixed relationship with the real world, characterized by absence of referent, substance and meaning (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

Far from attesting to postmodern hyperreality, photography for Baudrillard counted among the phenomena capable of resisting the onset of simulacra. It is defined as a medium of

capturing "the primitive dimension of the object" ("The Ecstasy of Photography" 33).[1] As a technology that is based upon the principle of referentiality, photography could resist the retreat of historical authenticity and dematerialization, caused by technological advances and economic development (Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Photography" 43-44). Such attachment could be viewed as nostalgic (Willis 140), but Baudrillard's affirmation of materiality of the photograph as "the trace left by the disappearance of everything else" ("Objects in This Mirror" 85) is entirely consistent with contemporary attitudes towards photography as an imprint, trace, index, or a phenomenological proof of the real. In her seminal collection of essays published in 1977, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag contended that "the consequences of lying have to be more central for photography than they ever can be for painting" (86). The year 1977 also marked the publication of "Notes on the Index," where Rosalind Krauss borrowed the term index to designate the relationship between the photograph and its referent as one based on contiguity. Finally, in 1980, Roland Barthes presented perhaps the most enduring interpretation of the photograph's bond with reality in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Contributions made by Barthes, Krauss and Sontag represent the foundational cornerstones of what will become photography theory as a new field of systematic research (Burgin).

Baudrillard was familiar with current ideas in this emerging field, stating, with reference to Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, that he was "in favour of 'punctum', in the sense of the singularity of the object at a given moment" ("The Ecstasy of Photography" 33). Significantly, Baudrillard made this statement with reference to this own photography. The philosopher

[1] See Gane on the problematic idea of the "primitive" (*Jean Baudrillard: In Radical Uncertainty* 88-97).

began making photographs in the early 1980s and initially considered it a diversion and an alternative to writing ("Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg" 32). Far from being a mere diversion, photography played an important role in Baudrillard's reflections on the medium and his wider critical project, since his practice and theoretical texts exist in a relationship of symbiosis. Olivier Richon observed that photography and writing for Baudrillard converge in a shared ambition "to analyse an object without interpreting it" (Richon 34), while for Gerry Coulter photographic practice led Baudrillard to "discover, without intending to, that photography can be theory" (Coulter 138). My interpretation of the interrelations between Baudrillard's writings and his photography overlaps with Richard G. Smith's view of Baudrillard's photography as engaging with, rather than merely illustrating, his preoccupations with the subject/object relationship (Smith). Study of Baudrillard's photographs makes it clear that he was fascinated with inanimate objects: architectural details, automobiles, urban landscapes, interiors, advertising billboards. In these photographs, the narcissistic object takes centre stage, reflecting Baudrillard's view of photography as "the conduit of pure objectality" ("Radical Exoticism" 154).

A photograph that Baudrillard took on his visit to Lisbon in 1986 is representative of his fascination with 'objectality' (see fig. 1). It shows a wall-mounted advertising panel featuring the face of a woman, her head dreamily falling back, lips parted in a seductive smile. In photographing the panel, Baudrillard cropped out much of contextual information, but was careful to include a row of lights illuminating the panel and electric fans mounted onto its surface. Crude intrusions into the illusory space of the advertisement act as a reminder of the manufactured nature of fantasy of unattainable perfection promoted by advertising. Within Baudrillard's categorization of objects in *The Consumer Society,* the human (female) body

becomes itself a consumer object, the "finest consumer object" because of the great share of disposable income that is lavished on its upkeep and embellishment (129). The Lisbon photograph, when placed within this context, is revealing of profound anxieties in a society where excess and frenetic consumption is concealed behind a veneer of luxury and glamour. The gesture of re-photographing an image that was originally based on a photograph, furthermore, draws attention to the role of photography in the consumer society. Its role, as Christopher Phillips noted, was immense, as photography actively participated in creating the culture of simulacra "as the principal source of mass imagery that ceaselessly circulates throughout the global *société de consommation* (consumer society) (Phillips 14).

Fig. 1. Jean Baudrillard, *Untitled (Lisbon)* (1986). Chromogenic photograph, 24 x 36 cm. Courtesy of Marine Baudrillard

As this analysis demonstrates, Baudrillard's photographic practice extended and refined his theoretical perspectives on photography. Attachment to the principle of referentiality and nostalgic recuperation in Baudrillard's writings converged with a sense of anxiety when faced with a dematerialized reality of consumer society, communicated in his photographs. But the challenge of photography lies in its capacity to confront theoretical assumptions about the medium. One assumption concerns the status of the photograph as "the conduit of pure objectality," that expressed a conviction, strongly held, that the photographic act reduces the subject to the function of a camera ("Radical Exoticism" 154). Baudrillard's photography contradicts this appraisal. The Lisbon photograph bears distinct markers of subjective decisions, evident in the use of dramatic lighting, lush colour and careful composition. These formal qualities endow Baudrillard's photographs with a considerable aesthetic appeal that their author claimed was entirely unintended (Baudrillard quoted in Zurbrugg 3). Baudrillard repeatedly denied photography's claims to artistic expression ("The Ecstasy of Photography" 33), which nevertheless did not stop him from displaying his photography on the walls of the museums of art (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*; Baudrillard and Weibel; Baudrillard and Heinrich).

Such contradictory attitudes were in fact symptomatic of the intense polemic surrounding photography's struggle for institutional validation as art in the 1980s in France. This decade has been pivotal in bringing a resolution to these debates as photography, saw its status evolve from a "middle-brow art" (Bourdieu) to a medium confident of its place on the wall of an art museum (Morel; Poivert, *50 ans de photographie française*). Questions concerning photography's identity as a medium emerged in art practices amidst attempts to validate photograph's status as evidence in scholarly discourses. As this has been noted above,

this was the time when photographic representation was theorized as the index or a phenomenological trace of the real. But the 1980s was also the decade when Baudrillard's "order of simulacra" was linked to photography as the main source of mass-produced images. The joint emergence of theories insisting on the supposedly intransient bond between the photograph and reality and those denying the very existence of reality cannot be a matter of mere coincidence. It should be regarded as a symptom, a manifestation of anxiety concerning the state of the real. In what follows, I address the nature of this anxiety, through an analysis of the works of Pierre et Gilles and Sophie Calle.

Part 2.

The work of artist duo Pierre et Gilles is habitually dismissed as inconsequential in its "shameless celebration of pop culture" and uncritical embrace of "fashion aesthetic based on exaggeration, seduction, and stylisation" (Attias). Here, a comparison can be drawn with Baudrillard's controversial standing due to his "hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis' style of writing" (Poster 8). The stylised, exaggerated aesthetic of Pierre et Gilles belongs to the genre of staged photography that emerged simultaneously across Europe and USA in the late 1970s to became one of the dominant practices of the 1980s. This genre is defined as concerned with "constructed realities" rather than a direct representation of reality (Köhler et al.) and privileges the camera as the ultimate point of the orientation of the staged event. Pierre et Gilles's *Gai Paris, Jean-Paul and Andréas* (1988) is representative of the elaborate staging process that is based on a predetermined scenography comprising of sets and props and involves orchestration of models, lighting, costume, and makeup. The models pose in front of a stage set created in the artists' studio comprising of a painted background of pale blue sky, with garlands of pink blooms framing the image. A

replica of the Eiffel Tower completes the compositional theme of "gai Paris" with its Belle Epoque connotations of frivolity, decadence and libertinage. Rose-pink and powder-blue colours combine with the blush tones of the white models' skin to produce a palette of airy, effervescent colors that contribute to a mood of carefree reverie. Two semi-naked youths, while being at the centre of the composition, blend into décor like another element of this dream universe. The pairing of a blond and a brunet recreates the stereotypical opposition in popular culture, but it also refers, in a self-reflexive gesture, to artists themselves. The real-life and creative partnership of (blond) Gilles Blanchard and (dark-haired) Pierre Commoy (Pierre et Gilles, *Autobiographie en photomatons*) has been the subject of numerous double self-portraits that draw on ultra-kitsch gay erotic fiction as well as referencing strategies of self-mythologization in art.

Pierre et Gilles's models are often drawn from the glamorous world of fashion, cinema, art and celebrity; the sitters have included Madonna, Serge Gainsbourg, Isabelle Huppert, Marc Jacobs and Conchita Wurst, among others. With the help of costumes, make-up, props and décor, as they pass through the "factory of idols" of Pierre et Gilles, the sitters are transformed into an idealised, fantasy version of themselves (Pierre et Gilles, *La Fabrique des idoles*). Their portraits, taken by Pierre and printed on canvas-backed support, are further embellished through manual retouching and re-painting by Gilles. "Being photographed by Pierre et Gilles," contended Michel Poivert, "is tantamount to gaining access to the portrait gallery of carnival kings and queens: placing the emblems of one's stardom into the hands of artists […] to be converted into their own vocabulary" ("The Vernacular Image" 45). While it true that "conversion" is transformative, I would suggest that attributes of stardom are transferred rather than surrendered, bestowing on the finished work the appeal of a celebrity name. The end

product is a blend that combines the emblematic attributes of the sitter with over-the-top embellishment, camp exuberance and wide-eyed idealism that has become the trademark style of Pierre et Gilles.

Like Baurdillard's simulacra, Pierre and Gilles's photographs have no stable point of origin in the real world. They originate in mass media and popular culture: the myth of the perfect body, created by cinema and advertising, the cult of the celebrity that is one of the enduring obsessions of the Western cultures, the obsession with youth. These tropes, drawn from representations and media events, are further overlaid with an eclectic mix of cultural clichés and romantic tropes, a wide range of religious motifs, and a heavy dose of camp. These images engage with the culture of simulacra by doubling its arbitrary, superficial and immaterial nature with images correspondingly depthless, whimsical and exalted. But in throwing back the image of high-gloss artifice Pierre et Gilles do not pretend to stand outside the pervasive influence of mass media. Indeed, the artists seem to be under the spell of the same seductive strategies of mediatization that they highlight as the defining feature of contemporary culture in consumer society. In this regard, their practice resonates with Baudrillard's hypothesis that, despite their "hyperreal" and immaterial nature, media events have profoundly real effects on those who experience them (*Simulacra and Simulation* 21).

The work of French artist Sophie Calle may seem initially very different from high-gloss drama of Pierre et Gilles, but it is similarly underpinned by a search for authenticity behind artifice. The encounter with the work of Sophie Calle was a vital catalyst for Baudrillard's engagement with photography, and he returned to her practice repeatedly in a series of essays written between 1983 and 1993 (Baudrillard, "Please Follow Me"; Baudrillard, "The Gray Imminence"; Baudrillard, "Pursuit in Venice"). The artist, for her part, appreciated

Baudrillard's support at the crucial early stage of her career, which gave her work visibility through an association with his name (Calle, "Lettre"). The relationship between Baudrillard and Calle may be considered a prime example of mutually enriching interchanges between art and thought in contemporary France that has long been the subject of critical attention (Wilson; Trifonova). But their relationship is also representative of Baudrillard's inattentiveness to the visual language of art, and a failure to meet the challenge of photography.

Baudrillard's analysis of Calle's *Venetian Suite* (*Suite vénitienne*) is a case in point. This project documents, through black and white photographs and documentary material, Calle's journey to Venice, undertaken with the aim of following a man whom she previously briefly met. The project is based on a method that has become a distinguishing feature of Calle's artistic practice, which consists of setting up a situation in a real-life context, which is then allowed to develop organically. The outcomes of such experiments are then recorded, through photography and text, and typically presented in installations combining text and image, as well as carefully produced artist's books. In his reflection on *Venetian Suite*, Baurdillard perceives the act of stalking a man who is barely known to the artist as fundamentally devoid of intention and meaning, and as such, characteristic of the interplay of simulacra as objects with no fixed relationship to reality. This discussion presents Baudrillard with an opportunity to expound his theory of radical otherness (altérité radicale), whereby Calle's effacing her own subjectivity in the act of following is interpreted as indicative of a collapse of the perspectival space between the observer and the observed (Baudrillard, "Facticité et séduction" 129-165).

But *Venetian Suite*, for all its apparent meaninglessness, is deeply marked by Calle's passionate involvement with the subject of her chase, identified as Henri B (Calle, "Suite vénitienne"). This involvement is undiminished by the fact that she barely knows the man; if anything, the mystery seems to create a blank screen onto which Calle is free to project her fantasies of a romantic attachment and erotic passion. The work may be based on fiction, a fabricated scenario, but it is revealing of the extent to which everyday reality is rooted on narrative, fantasy and fiction, as the basis for relationships, one's personal identity and life choices. As Iwona Blazwick perceptively noted, "behind the artifice of the mask and the arbitrary structure of an intrusion, lies the messy emotional truth of loss, disappointment, or frustrated expectation. The catalyst of and consequence of many of [Calle's] investigations is failure. Yet her unswerving application to following the rules of her own protocols and the remarkable responses that elicits from her protagonists, suggest what should be necessary, ethical conditions of social life" (Blazwick 15). The themes of reality, surveillance, social relations and intimacy continue to dominate Calle's distinctive practice, as can be seen from recent project *Because* (2018), a project that focused on narratives that lie hidden behind photographic representations.

Photographic work of Pierre et Gilles, Calle and Baudrillard himself is revealing of the extent to which materialism and illusion, real actions and media events are fused in a culture defined by enduring fascination with "the spectacle" (Debord). These ideas were developed in Baudrillard's seminal theories of simulacra, and relate to his wider project dedicated to the study of the object that goes back to his research into the effects of consumerism, media and technology on social relations in the post-industrial society. Considered within this historical, intellectual and artistic context, as well as within the history of institutional validation of

photography in France, Baudrillard's relationship with photography emerges as ambiguous, contradictory and enduring. A desire to identify phenomena that will be able to resist the onset of simulacra makes Baudrillard, in the eyes of Rex Butler, "a thinker not at all of reality as simulacrum, but of a possibility of reality when all is simulacra" (64). As a medium that has always been embroiled with thinking about our relationship with the real, photography provided Baudrillard with means of confronting anxiety over apparent erosion of the formerly stable constants and dematerialization of reality.

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Canned Reactions and FIFA Noise: The Specter of the Audience During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Synthetic crowd noise has been used in a variety of professional sports presentations since the onset of the pandemic. Sex dolls were used as seat-fillers during a professional soccer match in Korea in May of 2020. Technical compensations for the removal of crowds from stadiums indicate a dependency on the consistency of our media presentations. They also indicate a dependency on the kind of reproducibility that broadcast and presentation technology affords. This paper investigates—along McLuhanite and Baudrillardian lines—the significance of this inclusion of synthetic representations of an audience in order to legitimize the significance of these presentations and to pacify anticipated anxieties experienced by the television audience.

Keywords

technology, television, media theory, visual communication, mass media effects

On 17 May, 2020 K League club FC Seoul used what appeared to be sex dolls to fill out empty seats in their stadium during a match against Gwangju. The team's Instagram feed was subsequently filled with messages from fans who were, "outraged to that the club had failed to notice that the mannequins were 'so obviously' sex dolls" (Sang-Hun). The team was fined

100 million won, and there was some speculation that they might be barred from their own stadium over the incident (Diaz). In the abstract, it seems like an overreaction on the part of the league. Granted, professional sports—barring some exceptions—are presented as family entertainment and many leagues put a lot of effort into projecting a wholesome image. Sponsors and fans all assume that the discourse connected to the game will remain within the typical parameters: score, standing, statistics, and so forth. The question that this paper will address is why the sight of the dolls caused the kind of outcry that it did and, more importantly from the perspective of media theorists, what this might mean about our relationship with live-ness, authenticity, and the contemporary production of spectacle.

At a basic level, this is a story about an attempt to produce duplicates. Putting a substitute for a living person in those seats was a matter of finding the best available stand-in. The capabilities of technology and media seem to be limitless, but the ability to produce a credible replica of a breathing human being is no small task; nor is it possible without including a significant amount of contextual baggage. In responding to a question about clones, Jean Baudrillard argued that, "[t]his desire for cloning is just another way of disappearing, and a shameful one. It is a technological disappearance into artificial survival, corresponding to the elimination of the human as human" (*The Agony of Power* 123). The extent to which we want to disappear into spectacles is significant. Guy Debord knew that. So did Marshall McLuhan, though he would have argued that spectacles drag us toward them rather than the other way around. The need for a duplication remains however, and in the case of FC Seoul, desperation eclipsed context.

Baudrillard argues that "[w]hat we see now behind the eclipse of the 'objective' real, is the rise of Integrity Reality, of a Virtual Reality that rests on the deregulation of the very

reality principle" (*The Intelligence of Evil* 17). In this environment, anything that mimics the real is acceptable. In fact, driven to its limit, the idea of Integral Reality demands that the interpretation of something avoid designations like 'real' or 'authentic.' It is the position of the thing that matters—the placement in the precession of simulacra. The sticking point is that the context of something is carried with it like a shadow and the logic of an object in a system of representation does not eliminate its ontology.

The dolls were positioned in the stands in various poses mimicking enthusiastic sports spectatorship. They were all dressed in casual clothing and medical masks. There were 28 female and 2 male dolls, and their seating followed social distancing guidelines for people in public places during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emerged after the game that the dolls had been photographed holding advertisements for a variety of pornographic websites before the match, but that those signs had been removed before the start of play. In any case, the purpose was to position synthetic bodies in a way that might make up for the absence of real ones. Obviously, it didn't work.

For the majority of people who pay attention to sports, the focus on something that has no lifeworld consequences is legitimized by the enthusiasm of other people who are also paying attention. In other words, the crowd that voluntarily attends the spectacle and those who follow the team or the sport from a distance provide a reciprocal justification for each other. That enthusiasm transfers to the people who are personally taking part in the competition on display. There is an opportunity to identify with some of the participants in one way or another whether that is through the arbitrary selection of favorites or the recognition of a geographical connection shared between observer and participant. The result is that a relationship forms that encourages an emotional investment in the conduct and the result.

The league's condemnation of the use of the dolls appears to have been rooted in the fact that they were not 'mannequins.' It was understood that mannequins would be used to fill out the empty seats in the stands and, hopefully, mimic a familiar visual presence in a live soccer broadcast. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented the attendance of fans, and the oddity of the image of a pair of professional teams playing soccer in an empty stadium was something that an image conscious team and league would want to avoid. In fact, I can only think of a handful of matches prior to the pandemic that were played in empty stadiums and, in each of those cases, the crowds were barred from the stadiums due to violence between supporters. In the interest of providing a presentation that was as normal as possible, the league and the teams opted for fake humans. And those fake humans were supposed to be manufactured specifically as substitutes for the visual presence of human beings. This, of course, is not the primary reason for the production of sex dolls and that distinction is where the controversy was supposedly located.

They were *illegitimate* false observers. The obvious explanation is that this is due to the fact that the passivity implicit in a sex doll has more specific implications than those of a mannequin. It is the ability to use a body for sexual gratification independent of the consent of the object, effectively a rape endorsement. Veronica Cassidy has pointed out that "[r]ather than a gesture toward a post gender world, [sex dolls] are the worst of masculinity technologies employed to use, and abuse, women's bodies, reducing the feminine to a source of pleasure for man" (213). For makers of sex dolls, the attempt, as much as possible, is to create a substitute for a human body. It is arguable as to whether the increased interest and marketability in sex dolls indicates a cultural shift, but an expanding market is not an indication of increased social acceptance. In a basic sense, the doll exists as something that is to be acted upon rather than

observed. The type of action that is encouraged is one that is intrinsically connected to, at best, physical intimacy and, at worst, subjugation and violence.

It is important to point to Rebecca Gibson's work here and note her concerns that "[d]ue to scientific progress, we may be moving away from a feeling of uncanniness, when boundaries are confused, in regards to android/genomic beings, and toward a feeling of comfort and stability based on entire non-human reliability and durability, when we realize that these boundaries are something we created, and which we can uncreate" (241). Granted, Gibson's work is focused on the use of realistic sex dolls as companions and substitutes for human intimacy, but these uses for the objects combined with the realization that the companies that produce these dolls are, "doing a booming business" (241). It is notable that the dolls are marketed and apparently consumed as primarily private objects, so the movement, "away from a feeling of uncanniness" (Gibson 241) appears to be limited to private consumption rather than the public perception of the objects. Veronica Cassidy points out that, "loving a [sex] doll is widely stigmatized" (205). Her research into online forums for doll owners reveals that many are reluctant to admit their enthusiasm or ownership publicly. Many of the complaints from soccer supporters after the game were focused on a kind of lewdness related to the objects themselves. In the end, the reaction was rooted in the public display of something that is interpreted as personal.

As nonhumans, sex dolls function as an absence in practice. Sex dolls are generally marketed as 'almost as good as the real thing.' RealDoll.com, for instance, uses slogans like, "Dream. Your wildest fantasies into reality," and "We Spell Love R-E-A-L". The notion of substitution is present, as it is in mannequins, but the purpose of the object is that it might be a substitute—permanent or temporary—for another person. This incorporates an admission of

inferiority while allowing for a justified substitution for that real thing in its absence. The intrinsic passivity of the object is the reason it works as a solution for the absence of an actual partner. The key here is that the doll must be, at a basic functional level, substitutable for another person.

The idea was that the doll or mannequin would function as a prop that would allow the television viewer to maintain the sense of participation that would normally coincide with watching a broadcast match. In seeing themselves reflected in the bodies of the fans in the seats, the distance between the viewer and the physical event collapses a little. McLuhan described the encounter with electronic media as simultaneously an autoamputation—in that we ignore the parts of the body that are not directly involved in our interaction with the technical object—and an extension of the central nervous system—in that we come to experience what is transmitted to us as vibrant, immediate and urgent. This response depends on a comprehension, however, that the image and the sounds that are transmitted to us are comprehensible. This might explain why so much of television programming appears to be interchangeable—and no format is more predictable in its contours than sports broadcasting.

Veronica Cassidy, building off of Donna Harraway's work, points out that "the boundary between organisms and machine is part of an exploitative Western tradition" (211). The act of substituting real people for synthetic ones probably made a kind of sense when organizers were discussing what to do about the absence of real-life fans. Assuming that the objects used were indeed supposed to be mannequins, the problem being solved would have been the alienating absence of bodies in seats. Allowing television audiences to retain the sense of something significant happening—even though the outcome of professional sporting events is largely trivial to anyone other than the players, the supporters, and those with a financial interest in the

respective franchises—is crucial to the perpetuation of the impression that sport does, in some objective way, matter. The overture, then, might be interpreted as a kind of gesture towards the significance of the fans in the presentation of the match. These false bodies are here, they might have said, because the game is nothing without fans and this is the best we can do under the circumstances. The problem is that in proposing mannequins and finally substituting sex dolls the substitute appears to diminish the significance of the presence of supporters rather than highlight it.

This makes sense given that the simulation is something that is supposed to stand in for the real. Jean Baudrillard argued in *The Intelligence of Evil* (2005), that "*the simulacrum is not that which hides the truth, but that which hides the absence of truth*" (32). The fiction of participation in professional sports keeps the audience's interest and helps perpetuate the illusion of a relationship between fans and athletes. Multiple athletes have spoken fondly about the encouragement offered by supporters as they were plying their trade but so have rock stars and virtually no one would argue that someone who buys a ticket to a concert is automatically a member of the band. Those who invest a significant amount of their self-worth in following and supporting a particular sports team take ownership of the successes and failures of a group of people they presumably do not know and who do not know them. That said, the participation of the spectacle through witnessing is the basis behind sports fandom. The televising of matches allows for that tribal loyalty to be expanded beyond the limits of immediate physical proximity. In order for that to happen, the transmission of the match, the movement of the spectacle from the physical plane to the electronic one, must be endorsed not only by the teams participating and the fans in the stands but also by the supporters witnessing through media.

This connection is more or less by design, of course. McLuhan pointed out that "[i]n the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin" (52), and to a significant extent he was right. Our relationship with technology forces a kind of indulgence for impulses and information that are delivered to us synthetically. The body comes to be a kind of shell of authenticity that covers up layer upon layer of internalized electronic impulses and relationships. The delivery of the spectacle becomes the mechanism we use to interact with the outside world and, before long, the idea of participating by simply witnessing through a televised image doesn't seem so irrational. This would not have surprised Baudrillard:

> Against this obsession with the real we have created a gigantic apparatus of simulation which allows us to pass to the act 'in vitro' (this is true even of procreation). We prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real (*The Gulf War* 28)

The simulation is usually created because the real is inaccessible (either temporarily or as a matter of course). Video games make up for our horrifyingly typical physical abilities; films and novels make up for the unpleasant predictability or unpredictability of our lives; news broadcasts and websites make up for our inability to be in multiple places at the same time, and all of these augmentations normalize the presumption that simulations and digitally enhanced realities are correct substitutes for anything that is not achievable through the use of our bodies alone. Sport fills this gap in what is often a more personal sense; many of a team's supporters will have played the sport in question as children and, in some cases, as adults. The enthusiasm for watching someone perform at a level that we know we are incapable of performing satisfies the same desire to see the banal performed in an exceptional way. In this instance, however, the event is witnessable in real time and according to a set schedule. The extraordinary

happens on a defined schedule and it is possible to plan to witness it. In light of the fact, however, that there are a limited number of seats in any venue and that there are some matches and leagues that are prohibitively expensive, the production of a contemporaneous spectacle allows for greater access while preserving the sensation of witnessing directly.

Crucially, the contemporaneous presentation must still *resemble* our memory or impression of the real (as much as we're still cognizant of it) and the synthetic stands in service to the real in its absence (and when the digital cannot provide an alternative). Greater resolution in television images, higher quality sound from digital platforms, increased speeds of transmission all seek to service the impression that we are directly connected to whatever is being transmitted. So much so that people are often disheartened to discover that almost everything that is broadcast live is done so with an intentional delay built into it.

For example, a few years ago a beer company named Molson began distributing Wi-Fi-enabled lights that resembled the light behind the goal in professional ice hockey. The light would automatically sync with National Hockey League games that are broadcast on television and, when a goal was scored, the light lit up. The problem is that there was no delay built into the light's response to the action at the actual game but there was a 15-second difference between what was showing up on the television screen and the actual gameplay between the two teams. The lights are very popular in Canadian sports bars and there is a slightly surreal quality to seeing the light go off and then knowing that, within fifteen seconds, a goal will be scored. At one level, it increases the anticipation, but at another it tips the crowd off to who is going to score and seems to leech some of the mystery out of the contest. There is a desire for some sort of simultaneity on the part of those who pay attention to sporting events and any

violation of that illusion diminishes the audience's ability to pretend that they are directly involved.

It is worth noting that, a few months after FC Seoul's misstep, the soccer leagues in England resumed competitive play without fans in attendance. The solution to uncomfortable optics related to the absence of flesh and blood supporters in the stands has been to cover the seats with tarps that either display team logos and slogans or massive collections of selfies and webcam shots taken by supporters. Interestingly, the broadcasts now include optional audio of a simulated crowd reacting to the action on the pitch. The artificial intelligence required to make this happen is supported by Electronic Arts, the video game behemoth that puts out major multiplatform sports titles like those offered by the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League and, of course, FIFA. The crowd noise is integrated into the televised presentation and, in some cases, optional for viewers. Bundesliga in Germany, having gone back to a playing schedule before their English counterpart, tested the technology out in May and found that it allowed viewers to more easily concentrate on the action on the field (DeCourcy). The absence of familiar sounds coming from the fans, apparently, caused those watching the games to be distracted. The familiar sense stimuli of aural reactions was making it harder to focus on the—supposedly—primary input of the presentation; the visual. The amount of detail EA went into to produce the effect is impressive:

> EA Sports sampled 92 different crowd sounds and cheers to create these effects. And it will be authentic, not generic. The sound in each game will be taken from past matchups involving those particular teams at that particular stadium. (DeCourcy)

The audio provides a validatory signal to the visual information that is being transmitted. There is a comfort element to this as well. In the self-conscious context of crowd dynamics, those watching the action remotely want to have their reactions to the play on the pitch validated. The soundtrack delivers this kind of validation in the same way that a fitness tracker validates the fact that the person wearing it is exercising.

This level of involvement in an aspect of the contest that effectively does not have any impact on the result—the teams are not able to hear the soundtrack—indicates something significant about the relationship between professional sports and technology. The tools they use to communicate to their audience are, like other aspects of electronic media production, chosen because they help the audience immerse themselves in the events they are witnessing. The less intrusive or obvious these tools are, however, the more effective they are likely to be. What is interesting about the use of the crowd noise, however, is that even though it is obviously not phenomenologically connected to the action on screen, the rationale for using it is that it makes it easier for the television and streaming audience to immerse themselves in the game.

What we have here, then, is the use of two different tools to obfuscate the fact that soccer is continuing under a pandemic. The respective reactions indicate that one approach is working while the other clearly did not. Both tactics were used to accompany the same type of event over the same form of mass media. One of the adjustments involved sight and the other involved sound. From a McLuhanite perspective, the sense that is encouraged to touch the inauthentic part of the text will process the information differently than the secondary sense that illustrates rather than informs. In the case of the dolls, the visual element of evaluating other people is built into an immense matrix of social relations. Fundamental interpretations

based on preconceptions like racism, ageism and so forth, factor into this. So too do situational interpretive impulses like trying to read the behavior of the crowd to see how they are interpreting the progress of the game. The knowledge that we are looking at something that is literally marketed as a substitute for actual humanity underlines the distance we are now required to keep between ourselves and the event.

Most sex doll marketing emphasizes the extent to which the dolls are exchangeable with the idea of a living sexual partner. The emphasis on parity with the real as exchangeable with the synthetic fits comfortably with Baudrillard's assessment of integral reality. Indeed, it seems that the indignation related to the use of the dolls during a broadcast has to do with the underlying nature of their existence rather than an overt call to sexuality implicit in how they were presented in the stands. It is the obvious fakeness of the dolls that makes the image of them sitting in the stands cheering the play on the pitch that makes it unbearable. The synthesis of what is happening is impossible given the extent to which the dolls do not achieve the kind of chaotic animated humanity that links to large crowds. The possibility of everything being mistaken for the 'real' is dependent on the real being duplicable. Much in the same way that it strains credulity to watch old Hanna Barbera cartoons where characters walking down a hallway pass the same picture or end table over and over again because the studio reused background cells for simplicity and economy, the image of the lifeless dolls frozen in waving or reclining positions at once seems comical and insulting. The real is not able to get anywhere near this scene. What the audience is presented with is a collage of half-realized imitations of an idealized crowd's behavior. The inevitable conclusion is that, since we no longer have actual access to the real because of the precession of simulacra, the idea of an authentic real is a fallacy.

Examples from the 'Black Sox' scandal around the 1919 Major League Baseball World Series to the 2018 banning of Yu Delu and Cao Yupeng from professional snooker due to evidence of match fixing indicate that the enthusiasm we have for contests is rooted in a sense of legitimacy. This faith in legitimacy is tied as much to the expectations regarding the presentation of the event as it is to the expectations regarding the result. In the same way that many Western courts require public access to their court systems—faith in the efficacy of the system being rooted in the public's ability to witness the processes in action—the enthusiasm for something like professional sports is rooted in the witnessing of what is believed to be an honest contest between opponents. The witnessing here is crucial: the event is constructed for the benefit of an audience and the continued support teams get from their fan base is rooted in the belief that their support of the organization is tantamount to a kind of active participation. The use of the dolls in order to fill out the traditional presence of supporters acknowledged the need for witnesses to the event, but provided an alternative that negated the necessity or even the significance of the supporters.

The crowd noise modification has been applied to a number of different televised sport presentations at present and it appears to be working. The introduction of a ghost crowd helps maintain the sense of credibility in the proceedings. This should tell us something: in the same way that muzak was introduced into elevators in the twentieth century to calm the people who were inside when the doors closed, the introduction of recorded fan noise into the body of a televised sports presentation lulls the viewer into a sense of normalcy even though the visual elements underline the fact that things are, at present, not at all normal. The aural field augments what is happening in the visual field. It is different from one sport to the next, of course. The chatter coming from commentators during Major League baseball games is nearly

constant whereas the disembodied voices used to illustrate play in professional soccer leagues drift in and out of the presentation with the sound of the crowd used to fill in the blanks. In either case, however, the aural sets the mood for the presentation.

The widespread animosity to the use of vuvuzelas during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa would be a good case in point here. The BBC received enough complaints about the use of the horns during matches that it contemplated introducing an optional broadcast version the matches that would have edited the sound out of subsequent games (BBC). The expectations that we have about the presentation of live events—in this case, the sounds of cheering and singing that British crowds are accustomed to—made it difficult to enjoy the action on the pitch. The aural element of the broadcast is where audiences appear to find their comfort. Predictable nuances to the sound of a match validate the sense of involvement that a television viewer might feel towards the presentation. The absence of the possibility of this part of the presentation being included in the COVID-19 era of soccer matches made the viewing of the initial games even more alienating. It wasn't even that the crowd noise didn't conform to the expectations that went along with the normal nuances of the game; it was that the circumstances of professional sports had changed in such a way that prevented the possibility of crowd noise in the first place.

The reemergence of sport has told us a lot about our relationship with mass media and the expectations we have for it. In trying to explain the visceral and personal reactions we have to electronic media presentations, McLuhan argued that the connection was immediate enough to be personal. When Baudrillard was evaluating the prevalence of duplication and distribution in 20th century Western media environments, he determined that our relationship with the precession of images and duplications was enough to bury the reality beyond our reach. Our

relationship with televised sports is one that is both personal and political. The way in which we interact with these presentations is rooted in historical norms and contemporary relationships with our social landscape and political environment.

What was shocking about the use of sex dolls during a K League match was not, in spite of social media comments to the contrary, rooted in a prudish rejection of the objects and their manufactured purpose. The sexuality was an excuse, a justification for a visceral reaction to the sight of manufactured corpses doing the traditional work of human beings. The fear produced by COVID-19 was somehow embodied in a necro-performance signaling the replicability of human actors. The knowledge that it was impossible for fans to attend in person was the opening of the frustration, but that frustration still provided room for a sense of loss - that the spectacle would remain incomplete without the presence of a living crowd. The fear that the pandemic might alter our reality was suddenly overshadowed by the suggestion that reality didn't require us to continue functioning.

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Seduction Against Production: A Playful Way of Creating Knowledge

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Fig. 1. screenshot from *Mot de passe*, un film de Pierre Bourgeois et Leslie F. Grunberg, ©Montparnasse Productions, 1999.

Baudrillard Seducer is conceived of as an embodied collage that illuminates the contemporary resonance of Baudrillard's thought by drawing on *bricolage* aesthetics and poetics. It puts Baudrillard's theory of "seduction against production" in discussion with multiple sites of

production of knowledge such as scientific discourse, documentary, fiction, and popular culture. It does so by intertwining Baudrillard interview from *Mot de passe* with a broad range of archival visual materials, found footage, and movies. In what follows, I provide the rationale underpinning the making of the video and discuss Baudrillard's dialectical thinking in relation to Seduction. This video is ultimately an invitation to think *with* Baudrillard about the filmic writings of queer and heterosexual sexuality, seduction, and desire.

Fig. 2. Screenshot from *Mot de passe*, un film de Pierre Bourgeois et Leslie F. Grunberg, ©Montparnasse Productions, 1999.

My video stems from an artistic inquiry that "engages in a creative process of data collection, analysis and presentation" (166) in order to offer a playful way to bring to life Baudrillard's thinking. This practice-based inquiry builds on what Gioa Chilton and Victoria Scotti have described as "a process that uses the expressive qualities to convey meaning" (163). This method of inquiry builds on the intertwining of "layers of knowledge" (66). I

completed this project by ordering extracts from various kinds of movies (movies, art videos, experimental films, documentary, soap opera, YouTube videos) about sexuality or seduction that engage with Baudrillard's core ideas about seduction as radical alterity as explained by David Tech, "radical alterity implies we resist the empiricist urge to render everything in communicable forms of knowledge" (177). The outcome, which is best understood as an embodied collage or a symbolic kaleidoscope, builds an original dialectical relationship with Baudrillard's theory.

As an artist and a film programmer, I am used to working with archives and to researching and editing found footage movies. My editing and artistic work has long posited videos as part of myths and representations that shape our views on society and social and cultural issues. This project, along with the rest of my work, posits and explores culture as "an inherited legacy of works, thought and tradition" (134) as Baudrillard puts it in *The Consumer Society*.

I did this research and editing work while building on the Baudrillardian notion of culture defined by Richard Lane as "generated by creation and use of meanings" (44). This process was also framed by a very Baudrillardian question: can editing be an escape from the tyranny of meaning?

According to me, all these sequences could embody various meanings of seduction and "synthetized new learning" (166) and embrace some properties of collage. The device of collage allows us to think anew the meaning of each image through the concept of seduction. The common principle of my editing method is a reversal of Baudrillard's speech and juxtaposes it with visual footage in order to create new associations. Following Baudrillard's tendency to reversion, this approach is also a way to beat Baudrillard at his own game.

I claim to adopt a non-fetishist posture. In my work I love to deflect, reroute and distort videos, mixing up what already existed in order to change its primary meaning. Images, sequences, thoughts and ideas would be confronted to expose what could be seen as myth in Roland Barthes's view: "what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message" (107).

Fig. 3. Screenshot from *Sexualities*, ©Les froufrous de Lilith, 2017.

Seduction Against Production

Roland Barthes wrote *Mythologies* and defined "myth" by reading gossip magazines such as *Paris Match* and by watching TV. I, on the other hand, tried to imagine what Baudrillard could have seen, the images he could have been or was being exposed to when he was developing his theory of seduction. As I gathered a corpus of videos from various sources, I embraced his insight that there is "no scale of measure in the symbolic chain. No species is inferior to any

other. Nor is any human being. All that counts is the symbolic sequence" (131). We could use this terminology of symbolic chain and apply it to these video fragments whose common denominator is that they all convey a certain representation of the notion of seduction. Regardless of the site of knowledge it stems from, none of the footage is superior since, through their intertwining with Baudrillard's interview, they all integrate a symbolic chain; they all convey a dialogical encounter that can create happy coincidences in the meaning they create.

Thus, with this video there is an effort produced to seduce the audience as "to produce is to materialize by force what belongs to another order, that of the secret and of seduction. Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or concept" (34).

Fig. 4. Screenshot from *Sexualities,* ©Les froufrous de Lilith, 2017.

Seduction Reversibility

Reversibility is the key concept in all of Baudrillard's thoughts. Through this video, I took the counterfeet of Jean Baudrillard's concept of seduction, being sometimes literal with its discourses and sometimes opening a gap of doubt. I wanted to convey a game of appearances that plays with all the sequences connected with sexuality. As Baudrillard writes in *Seduction*: "modern unreality no longer implies the imaginary, it engages more reference, more truth, more exactitude - it consists in having everything pass into the absolute evidence of the real" (34).

This video aims to create a way of escaping this "absolute evidence of the real" which here would be to dismiss an authority figure, not abiding by usual hierarchies of epistemological knowledge (i.e. science over soap movie). Abolishing the distinction between something patrimonial and something trivial is not only a way of curating it and creating a new gesture in the meaning of each image. It is also a way of creating a suspension in the audience's perception of these images. It is meant to create a surplus of interpretation, an experiential and embodied knowledge, a performance of *bricolage* unmoored from epistemological hierarchies, "this defamiliarization process highlights the power of the confrontation with difference to expand the researcher's interpretative horizons" (687).

Then this work draws a question about pure enjoyment: can we appreciate images for their own sake? Can they be independent from any transcendence or ultimate meaning? As Baudrillard puts it "there is a kind of anthropological joy in images, a kind of brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgements" (28). Only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us. It leads nowhere other than astray.

Fig. 5. Screenshot from *Réflexions sur la puissance motrice de l'amour*, un film de Pierre Trividic, ©Ex Nihilo, Canal +, 1989.

The Game of Otherness

I'd like the idea to play with those videos exactly as seduction is a *game of otherness* while editing videos around one theme and trying to create *une mise en abîme*. Seduction out of images does not come entirely from the content itself, but it also comes from the chain of thoughts led by the order of the videos; that happy coincidence. It sets a dialogue with the viewer who takes part in creating an interpretation of the meanings conveyed through juxtaposition, what Roland Barthes would qualify in "The Rhetoric of the Image" as "surprises of meaning" (35).

This is why "seduction is that which is everywhere and always opposed to production; seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view" (34).

Fig. 6. Screenshot from *Mot de passe*, un film de Pierre Bourgeois et Leslie F. Grunberg, ©Montparnasse Productions, 1999.

Then, seduction remains part of the invisible, it belongs to the sphere of the secret. And Baudrillard's thought keeps demonstrating that the world is disappearing because it is given too much signification, it is made significant, therefore seduction is an operation to subtract, to escape from this hypersemiotics that production would embody.

Seduction is "an ironic, alternative form" (Mot de passe) that "provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance" (Mot de passe), just as this *bricolage*, if we try to decontextualize the ideology behind it and turn it into anthropological joy. Nicolas Mirzoeff explains it "in finding a way out of the culture labyrinth, visual culture develops the idea of culture as expressed by Stuart Hall: Cultural practice then becomes a realm where one engages with and elaborates a politics. Politics does not refer to party politics but to a sense that culture is where people define their identity and that it changes in accord with the needs of individuals

and communities to express that identity" (72).

Fig. 7. Screenshot from *Réflexions sur la puissance motrice de l'amour*, un film de Pierre Trividic, ©Ex Nihilo, Canal +, 1989.

The video plays with the imagination as a social practice where all these media are part of the constructed landscape of collective aspirations reproduced by curating choices. Thus, the image and the editing aim to articulate a new discourse around a theme as it realizes "a symbolical exchange of appearances" (mot de passe). We want to seduce images by turning them away from their identity. Curating films is in this case an operation of seduction as the association of sequences offers a new reading on one topic, a dialectical encounter of various cultural prisms, collective aspirations and social practices.

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"That's Not You": Reclaiming the "Real" in Rosie the Riveter Re-appropriations

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Abstract

The "We Can Do It!" of a female World War II war worker poster is considered an image of feminist empowerment. But its association with feminism is a largely late-20th and 21st-century development. This paper examines the image, and its modern re-appropriations, through the lens of Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra and hyperreality. The image itself is part of the simulacra, developing meaning detached from historical facts about its origins and use during World War II. The paper specifically looks at the so-called inspiration for the original poster and a contemporary recreation of it that was later apparently adopted for use in a get-out-the-vote campaign. In both cases, the women represented pushed back at their image absorption, and the erasure of their identities within the simulacra. The paper demonstrates how the individual represented in the image struggles to maintain her own identity within the simulacra, often to mixed success.

Keywords

Rosie the Riveter, simulacra, hyperreality, image, World War II

In November 2020, a woman found a U.S.-based company using an image that looked suspiciously like her being reproduced on face masks, buttons, and other products encouraging people to vote. She was never asked if the image could be used. The woman is a contemporary

pin up, or a person (male or female) who adopts vintage fashion and make-up as part of their identity (Ryan, *Pin Up!*). In the image in question, she paid homage to the famous "We Can Do It" Rosie the Riveter poster from World War II. The twist was that Pinup Little Bit, unlike the women in the original, is a dark-skinned Latinx woman.

The products she found for sale online featured a drawing that appeared to be strongly influenced by a photograph of Little Bit as Rosie. Aside from some slight changes to the clothing it seemed identical to Little Bit's photo in posing, skin tone, and facial expression (see *Figure 1*). Little Bit has faced issues with people adopting her photo without her permission before, often as a part of montages showing the original Rosie and subsequent reinterpretations. Little Bit's solution in these cases has simply been to ask for credit. She's not seeking to monetize her work, but rather wants to get proper recognition for the photographer and herself. In this case, when she approached the company asking for a credit line, they responded "that's not you."

Baudrillard notes that representation is intrinsically tied to the real—an inherent assumption that the sign (in this case the image) relates back to some concrete thing. But within the simulacra, the real and the sign are disassociated from each other so that the sign is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference to circumference" (Baudrillard 524). Or, a person can be told that an image which on the surface represents their face, expressions, and other markers, can instead be "not you." Baudrillard defines this as the hyperreal. "In a reversal of order, in third-order simulation, the model precedes the real (e.g. the map precedes the territory)—but this doesn't mean that there is a blurring between reality and representation; rather, there is a detachment from both of these, whereby *the reversal becomes irrelevant*" (Lane 84).

Fig. 1. Rob Neill Imagery. Pinup Little Bit as Rosie the Riveter. (2005). Courtesy Sharon Escamilla.

This paper argues that the "We Can Do It!" poster and its contemporary iterations demonstrate how an iconic image exists as part of the simulacra. The poster becomes "echoic" (Rivas-Carmona and Balsera-Fernández), a type of iconic image where power and meaning echo across different contexts. While initially created during World War II, by the late 20th-

and early 21st-centuries "Rosie" became a performance of feminist empowerment. Unlike postfeminism, this performative approach claims feminism as necessary, includes a knowing nod to racial, ethnic, and gendered queerings of the meaning of the original, *while at the same time* becoming what Toffoletti refers to as a feminist self-referring sign.

The performance shifts meaning of the image from one grounded in second wave, White-centric feminism to a more inclusive understanding. Over time, it provides evidence that the poster itself was always an inclusive feminist symbol, despite any historical evidence to the contrary. The original, its reinterpretations, and the subsequent use by a manufacturer demonstrate how the simulation can be disassociated from its referents to become the hyperreal—a state where the individual is no longer recognized as herself. The hyperreal not only supersedes the original, it renders the original moot. The individuality of the individual is erased. The image exists in a sphere in and of itself, a move that the "subject" of the image—or the individual performing a reinterpretation—can find profoundly disorienting. But within this space the individual also pushes back, attempting to reclaim the self despite this erasure.

The Original Rosie: From "First" to "Second" Order Simulation

Little Bit is just one of a number of famous and not-so-famous women (and men) who have adopted the pose of the female war worker to perform gender, agency, and identity. In the original, the woman wears a denim shirt with a round white patch on the collar (see *Figure 2*). She looks at the viewer with a solemn expression on her face. Her hair is covered by a red scarf with white polka dots, which is tied in a bow at the top of her head. A single brown curl grazes her forehead and a few stray tendrils escape the scarf at the nape of her neck and the right side of her face. She is clearly White. Her brown eyes are framed by a think fringe of long eyelashes, with smokey shadow covering her lids. No eyeliner is visible. Her eyebrows

are sharply tweezed, her cheeks are dusted with blush, and her lips and nails are graced with a neutral coral hue. She wears no jewelry. Her left hand rolls up her shirtsleeve, while her right is raised in a fist. The words "We Can Do It" appear in white over a dark blue background in a comic-like thought bubble. The background of the rest of the image is bright yellow.

The poster itself is steeped in legend. James Kimble notes: "Cultural knowledge insists rather convincingly that the poster was famous on the 1940s home front, that it was instrumental in recruiting women into the munitions factories, and that it was an official government product" (247). This "knowledge" is grounded in historical fact: The Office of War Information coordinated wartime propaganda efforts to improve morale during the war (Braverman). This includes images directed toward women, including military recruitment posters (Ryan, "Don't Miss"), advertisements (Yesil), and magazine illustrations like the powerful and muscular woman war worker by Norman Rockwell that appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943. The campaign placed posters in a variety of public places (Ellis) and was designed to demonstrate American strength and garner support for the war effort (National Archives).

However, there's no evidence this poster actually was publicly distributed during the war by anyone outside of the factory floor or that the government had any direct hand in its creation. Rather, the poster was made by J. Howard Miller for a *specific* short-term campaign for the Westinghouse Electric Company in 1943. At the bottom of the poster, there is information about who produced the image (the War Production Co-ordinating Committee) and instructions to "Post Feb. 15 to Feb. 28," along with a Westinghouse emblem. The official sounding "War Production Co-ordinating Committee" was actually an *internal* unit within the Westinghouse corporation with a goal "to increase production, to decrease absenteeism, and to

avoid strikes" (Kimble and Olson 544). The poster was never used for external recruiting and instead was "was meant for display on the factory floor" (Kimble and Olson 547).

Fig. 2. Howard Miller. *"We Can Do It!"* (1943). Poster produced for Westinghouse, 22 X 17 in. Courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Similarly legend-imbued is the identity of the woman represented in the poster. In the mid-1980s, as the poster was gaining currency in popular culture, Geraldine Hoff Doyle thought she recognized herself in both the poster and in an image it may have been based on, a photograph of a factory worker at a lathe. She first saw the photo in a copy of *Modern Maturity* magazine in 1984; a decade later, she saw the poster on the cover of *Smithsonian* magazine and claimed both represented her, saying "I know what I looked like" (Kimble 253). After she died in 2010, her daughter told the *New York Times*, "[t]he arched eyebrows, the beautiful lips, the shape of her face—that's her" (Williams A26).

This would seem to definitively settle the notion of identity: A woman recognized herself in both a photograph and a poster, ergo she must be the women in both images. Kimble calls this the woozle effect, or a process where flawed data gets misused and ends up creating a new "truth" (Kimble 246). The photo Doyle saw in 1984 was published without a location or date listed. The only evidence that she was the woman in it came from Doyle herself. In actuality, according to a caption attached to the original image, the photo was of Naomi Parker Fraley. It was taken at the Alameda Naval Air Station in March 1942, when Doyle was still in high school and lived in Michigan (Kimble 263). While it's impossible to verify if Miller *specifically* used the Fraley image as inspiration, it was a part of the national publicity about women war workers. However, the documentation about the creation of the poster is "fragmentary" (Kimble 256).

This lack of detail is problematic if one is trying to ascertain a single historical "truth," i.e. is the woman in the image Doyle or Fraley? This of course is why Kimble is talking about woozles—he's concerned with understanding the provenance of the image and using it to clarify the historical record. Facts matter. There is an attempt to associate the sign (the image)

with the real (the photographic inspiration). But viewed through a Baudrillardian lens, the question is less important. The history of its creation—if it was created because Miller saw a specific image and married the face to a different body, if he created it to be a composite of multiple photographs, or if the image sprung from his imagination—is irrelevant because the image itself is a simulation. What matters here is the *level* of simulation. The Miller illustration isn't a direct representation of the real, instead it "blurs the boundaries between reality and representation" (Lane 84). Because there is no record tying the poster to specific referents, the "We Can Do It!" poster becomes a "second order" of simulation, part of the simulacra.

This blurring of lines—between the real and the simulation—becomes discomforting when the individual is inserted into the space. If "the real is no longer what it used to be" (Baudrillard 525), does that mean that the person herself is similarly not who or what she thinks she is? Can a photograph of an individual, which clearly links the sign to the real, be similarly claimed by someone else as also being "her"? Can an element that is firmly entrenched in the simulacra be reinterpreted to be a reflection of reality? Before she died in 2018, Fraley expressed this discomfort. She was attempting to correct the historical record and identify the lathe worker photograph as her, while at the same time accepting its assumed connection to the Miller poster. As Kimble observed, Fraley "was none too pleased to find that her identity was under dispute . . . The fact that someone else's name had intervened, even becoming accepted public knowledge, had been a constant source of distress for her" (Kimble 268). She, like Doyle, was pushing against the simulacra and trying to assert that profound reality existed. She did this with the support of popular culture, which worked under the assumption that there must be a *single* model for the woman in the poster. *People* magazine identified Fraley as "the Real Rosie" and said she was the "likely inspiration" for the poster.

"It feels good," Fraley told the magazine of this reaffirmation of her claim. "I didn't want fame or fortune. I did want my own identity" (Dunlop 90).

Rosie Re-appropriations: "Third Order" Simulations

Even though "We Can Do It!" poster "is an image so powerful and iconic that it might be difficult to believe that it was virtually unknown" during much of the twentieth century (Kimble and Olson 537), by the 21st century it is practically omnipresent. Here's singer Christina Aguilera, in a 1940s-themed music video for the song *Candyman* dancing at a soda fountain with a slew of other Rosies in a midriff-baring red shirt and blue jeans, with a bandana tied in her bleached-blonde hair. Here's Beyoncé on Instagram posting her own version of the Miller "We Can Do It!" poster; it's gotten more than 1.4 million likes to date. The actress Alexis Bledel took to the pages of *Glamour* for her Rosie homage, wearing high-waisted pants, a denim shirt and a multi-colored scarf covering her hair. Reality stars Kris and Kendall Jenner, the singers Pink and Kelly Rowland, and professional wrestler Rhonda Rousey have similarly adopted the Miller poster clothing and pose. The "We Can Do It!" interpretation of Rosie appears as an action figure, as illustrations of male celebrities like Michael Jordan and Matt Lauer, and, in 2020, as wearing a mask and hospital scrubs to honor healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even former first lady Michelle Obama was seen in a Rosie-style pose, wearing a purple shirt and saying "Yes, We Can."

These images not only draw from our historical "knowledge" (mimicking Rosie's clothing, make-up, and pose), but also upon the star image of the women (and men) portraying her. We can't separate the image of Kendall Jenner, for instance, from our knowledge that she is a prominent fashion model and Instagram influencer, or the Obama illustration from her political celebrity and role as former First Lady of the United States. But they are also an

intentional performance, reinterpreting the original sign with a message targeted to a specific audience that builds upon that very star image.

In the Beyoncé photograph, from 2014, an African American woman grafts her racialized identity onto a White cultural touchstone (see: https://www.instagram.com/p/qwWCsgPw7N/). Instead of a polka-dotted scarf, Beyoncé uses a red paisley bandana to cover her hair. The resulting bow at top is much larger than the one in the poster. Her hair is otherwise uncovered and flows loose to the middle of her back. The pop singer's eyes are almost closed, with the irises impossible to see. The image also plays on our own knowledge of Beyoncé as star. On her left hand, her wedding ring is clearly visible; Beyoncé is married to rapper Jay-Z and at the time the image was created, had one child, Blue Ivy. The paisley bandana's color and the way it is tied on her head echoes one of her costumes from the retro-themed 2010 music video "Why Don't You Love Me." But key markers of the Rosie image—the raised fist, the denim shirt, the muted makeup, the yellow background, the "We Can Do It" thought bubble—are all fairly similar to the original poster.

These recurring images demonstrate the woozle effect that is the "We Can Do It!" poster colliding with the simulacra. The recreations are detached from the actual role of the poster during World War II; there's no evidence the poster appeared in popular media before a *Washington Post Magazine* article in 1982 (Kimble and Olson 536). They are instead based on late-20th century reinterpretations of the image. These mediated revisions, over a period of four decades, transform it into an echoic representation of feminism (Rivas-Carmona and Balsera-Fernández) which is "empowering symbol for women" (Kimble and Olson, 537). The echoic nature of these homages ignores the provenance of the poster and its limited role within the war effort. Instead, they refer to each other, bolstered by sketchy secondary sourcing in

blogs or social media. This demonstrates what Kimble calls “the ongoing rhetorical power of the woozle effect in the electronic age” (247). But they also demonstrate how the image has moved from the "second order” to the “third order” of simulation.

Baudrillard marks this order as masking the absence of reality (524). He uses the example of the Disneyland theme park: the park is, obviously, a fantasy world (with one area of the park literally called Fantasyland). But its existence conceals that America itself is a part of simulation. “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real . . . It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (Baudrillard 529). These “We Can Do It!” recreations become a part of the hyperreal. The actual history of the image doesn’t matter, e.g. the fact that the poster was not widespread propaganda during World War II, that it wasn’t used to motivate women to work, and that it wasn’t created by the federal government. Instead, the cultural knowledge generated post-1980 about the image supersedes this historical data and renders it irrelevant. Here, the images refer to each other (or are echoic) and reinforce the knowledge that this is “Rosie”: a historic symbol of female empowerment.

This new representation not only supersedes the image’s actual role in history, it also transforms our knowledge of the World War II era. Rosie becomes, to borrow from Butler, a performance, “an object of belief” (520). Each performance of Rosie reinforces our cultural knowledge of her meaning within the third order simulation.

The Simulacra, Hyperreality and Performativity

Little Bit’s version of Rosie is part of this performance. It was created in 2005, predating the Beyoncé homage. It is an early image for the pin up, created in the first year or two of her

aesthetic explorations, well before she modeled for any vintage fashion companies or won any pin up contests. Little Bit's Rosie wears a denim shirt and raises a fist in front of a yellow backdrop, but other elements clearly mark the image as "hers" (see *Figure 1*). There is no visible bow in the polka-dotted scarf, and instead of a single curl, a mass of curls grazes her forehead. Unlike the Miller or Beyoncé images, where the women turn their faces toward the viewer, Little Bit's head is slightly tilted, leaving the left side of her face nearly in profile. Her eyes are framed by thick lashes and heavy shadow, outlined in black cat-eyeliner. Her cheeks, lips, and fingernails are red. Her lips are full. The words "We can do it" are not a thought bubble, but a banner across the top of the image. Little Bit is a darker-skinned Latinx woman, but her facial markers (the shape of her nose and lips, the texture of her hair) echo the Eurocentric beauty standards found in the original poster.

Butler defines performativity as a series of reinforcing acts. Through performance we reinforce or transform meaning (in Butler's case gender norms). In her image Little Bit both performs the 21st-century expectations of Rosie as a feminist icon, and also transforms them. In so doing, she helps to shift the meaning of the simulacra that is Rosie. Rosie now is no longer only an icon of White feminism, but one of a more inclusive feminism. Of course, Little Bit is not the only woman of color to "claim" Rosie. Nonetheless, her performative act helps to reinforce the expanded meaning of Rosie, especially when considered alongside later acts by Beyoncé and other African American or Latinx women like Aguilera and Rowland.

The face mask and button created by David Hays for Creative Action Network (CAN) are similarly is operating within this sphere, both referring to and diverging from all of the Rosies who came before (see: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHNxNU2BdMV/ or https://www.instagram.com/p/CEmY9c-ANN7/). Rosie is wearing a light blue and white

polka-dotted halter top, with the word "VOTE" behind her in white across a light blue background that echoes the color of the top. This Rosie is not only more sexualized (through the more revealing clothing), but is also advocating participation in the democratic process. The arm is raised in the familiar fist. But unlike the original "We Can Do It!" poster, the Hays 'Rosie features a face in semi-profile. A tangle of curls peeks out from a red and white polka-dotted scarf on the woman's forehead, the rest of her hair is completely covered by the fabric. Her full lips are bright red, and her eyes are framed by a distinct cat-eyeliner. Her skin is not light but an olive hue.

In other words, this version of Rosie features key visual markers that seem identical to those found in the image of Little Bit. Little Bit attempted to assert that the image was indeed inspired by her, sending the company her original image and asking that the manufacturer tag her in social media posts as being the inspiration. CAN refused, and before deleting its comments from Instagram, said: "This design is based on Rosie the Riveter who has been a muse to hundreds of artists. We stand by our artist and our design. The design is not based on you." A representative from the company later told Little Bit that the image was inspired by Beyoncé. Her friends then rushed in to help prove that Little Bit was, in fact, the Rosie in the drawing. One, Wenzdai Figueroa, argued that the drawing was a "trace" or an image created by manipulating the photograph in Photoshop. She then used layering in Photoshop to create a GIF (see: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHQdw76FMzA/?igshid=ivy6risxwpzh) demonstrating the similarities between the two images.

Baudrillard (2001) calls this "the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real" (536) that is found within the hyperreal. This is a sphere that is not bound by "reality" but instead is grounded fully within the simulation itself. "It is measured as such in terms of its

performativity—how well does it work or operate?" (Lane 84). But there is a tension here. The individual, in this case Little Bit, is tying her performance to a specific sign; it is existing within her understanding of a fixed semiotic system. But within the simulacra, the semiotic system is in constant flux, with multiple Rosies speaking to and referring to each other.

This results in an erasure of individuality within the hyperreal, and a complication as to what constitutes a feminist act. Instead, feminism is reduced to a simple concept (feminism = female emancipation) that is "is everywhere and nowhere," effectively erasing any nuances and resulting in "our collective inability to coherently define or confidently determine the parameters of feminism within a political and cultural economy that has become virtualized" (Toffoletti 110). Little Bit's performative and political move is not only no longer "hers," but it is not even identifiable. This allows the Hays/CAM Rosie to intentionally obfuscate Little Bit's contributions and exist fully within a pseudo-feminist Rosie simulacra, where it refers to other Rosies. Meanwhile, like the "original" Rosies Doyle and Fraley, Little Bit and her friends are disoriented. They are demanding that representation not be caught up in the möbius strip that is the simulacra, but rather be firmly attached to the referent, which is itself, of course, an appropriation.

You're Not Seeing What You Think You're Seeing: The "Fourth Order" Simulation

This is a decidedly postmodern situation: a person emulating a historical character is asked to believe that an apparent drawing of her emulating said historical character is not, in fact, her. Within the postmodern, "the hyperreal produces a society of surfaces, performativity and a fragmentation or fracturing of rationality" (Lane 89). Little Bit and her friends push back against this fracturing of rationality, while at the same time participating in its fracturing through her Rosie homage. They're not staking their claim based on issues of copyright or

intellectual property, but rather on their understanding of the existence of a verifiable reality. In their minds, it is obvious that the image is a trace of Little Bit's version of Rosie, and it is inconceivable that Hays or CAN would be unable to recognize that.

But it is important to note that, as with Doyle, the "perceptual link" between the two images "came from [the woman] herself" (Kimble 255). Little Bit and her friends believed that the woozle of perceptual proof was enough, especially since they were able to "prove" their claims through a type of forensic documentation. The gif demonstrated the similarities between the facial expression and body position of the drawing and the photograph. The photograph they believed inspired the drawing itself was created long before the Beyoncé image. The frustration was intensified on social media by a perception that while some companies (the manufacturer of the button, a distributor) did validate Little Bit's claims and gave her credit, neither Hays nor CAN offered similar validation.

Meanwhile, the manufacturer has stepped into the distinct language of the postmodern and the simulacra. Despite visual markers connecting the drawing to the photo of Little Bit, within the simulacra, it is not based upon her at all. The image is either based loosely upon the Miller poster or upon the Beyoncé Instagram post—whose "We Can Do It!" interpretation looks only vaguely like the original poster and nothing at all like the drawing reproduced on the buttons and face masks. Toffoletti notes that the simulacra not only subsumes the original, but the traces of its uniqueness completely vanish: "The acceleration and proliferation of signs makes no logical connections, follows no discernible order, and results in no knowable or final outcome" (113). In the case of Little Bit, her performance itself—through the distinct markers she brought to her interpretation of the Miller poster—disappear within the swirl of simulation.

The original debate as to who was the woman in the lathe photo and if she was the inspiration for the Miller photo, and the latter dispute between Little Bit and Hays/CAN over the source of inspiration of a drawing, illustrate the push/pull between the real and the simulacra when confronted by the individual. As Baudrillard notes, the hyperreal drives society into a search for the real, through image production and reproduction. We want to know definitively who was the source for an iconic poster, or that an image in a marketing campaign that resembles an individual is in fact her. But hyperreality has also become "the dominant way of experiencing and understanding the world" (Lane 84), and leads to a condition where "the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself" (Baudrillard 536). Here, feminism, and its reduction within the simulacra into only superficial emancipation, erases not only the complexities and necessities of feminist advocacy, but also the subversiveness of the performance that is Little Bit's Rosie.

So does that mean that the individual's attempts to resist the hyperreal are futile? If the original is moot and the hyperreal is the dominant condition of postmodernity, it would seem to indicate that the women discussed here—Doyle, Fraley, and Little Bit—are simply tilting at proverbial windmills.

Perhaps not. In a way, their success may be tied to how cemented the image itself is within the simulacra and its own ties to "reality." In this case, both photographs are able to exist as a "second order" simulation (blurred boundaries between reality and representation). We know the images are representations and not physical women. Still, Fraley received recognition that the photo was, in fact, of her, and Little Bit's identity as the women in the 2005 photograph of the Latinx Rosie is unchallenged. In both cases, the image has a clear referent (the real woman who was the subject of the photograph).

Although in "profound reality" (Baudrillard's term for the physical world) this relationship between sign and referent is important, within the hyperreal it is deprioritized. This deprioritization comes when the images move from the private space of the individual, and enter into a more public sphere. At that point, they become part of the larger state of hyperreality (production and reproduction of the real) surrounding Rosie the Riveter. The photographs are now a part of the never-ending, self-referential nature of the simulacra. This is the same spot where both illustrations—the Miller poster and the Hays/CAN VOTE image—are firmly entrenched. They are at home within the hyperreal, a part of the pure simulacrum. In these images, it is more difficult for the individual to assert ownership—or subvert the essentialist (surface) message of feminism. The images instead actively work to retain their place in the simulacra, resisting ties to reality and instead drawing the individual into a space where she can be told with certainty that she is not herself.

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Jean Baudrillard and Feminism: Sara Ahmed and the Necessity to "Forget Baudrillard"

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Abstract

Jean Baudrillard's work has had a turbulent relationship with feminist thought. Victoria Grace attributes this turbulence to a general refusal on the part of feminist critics to engage, borrowing from Rex Butler, with Baudrillard "in his own terms" (1). In this essay, I challenge Grace's faith in Baudrillard's work to wrest feminist thought from the clutches of hyperreality. Conversely, I argue that Grace's lionization of Baudrillard's theories as a panacea to the problems facing contemporary society is itself a replication of the very model of hyperreality that she, and Baudrillard, decries. To argue this, I perform two operations. Firstly, I present Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum arguing that its emergence does not mark the dissipation of the real in favor of the virtual but that it signals the emergence of a single world-view, or "integrated circuit," that is taken as objectively real. Secondly, I turn my attention to Sara Ahmed's feminist critique of Baudrillard's work in "his own terms" and how this critique informs a need to push Baudrillard's theories further than he himself pushed them. I conclude by suggesting that Baudrillard's theories can be—and have been—used by

feminist thought but that they must not be accepted as inviolable lest we participate in the very simulacrum that he so vehemently opposed.

Keywords

Jean Baudrillard, Victoria Grace, Sara Ahmed, feminism, hyperreality, critique

Jean Baudrillard's work has had a turbulent relationship with feminist thought. In *Baudrillard Challenge: A Feminist Reading*, Victoria Grace attributes this turbulence to a general refusal on the part of feminist critics to engage, borrowing from Rex Butler, with Baudrillard "in his own terms" (Grace 1). For Grace, feminism is marred by either a political and philosophical appreciation of the politics of performativity, the "dominant logic of discourse in an era where the relation of language and world is structured in accordance with sign value" (124) or they are committed to biological determinism, a kind of "anatomy as destiny" (157). In either case, Grace argues that feminism is only successful at replicating the patriarchal system it seeks to challenge and that it would benefit from Baudrillard's "radical" (18) theory that opposes all systems at their cores.

At a time when we are inundated with mediated images and messages, Baudrillard's work seems more relevant than ever. However, it is important to temper the often cynical tone that is extracted from his work, positioning any ideas that flow from these media as *prima facie* suspicious—as complicit with the oppressive logics of hyperreality. Feminists, anti-racist activists, and trans activists—to just name a few—have taken up these media to call attention to the forms of oppression that permeate their daily lives in the hyperreal spaces indicative of social media. As such, our (re)turn to Baudrillard's work should be conducted cautiously, with

an eye to the many anti-oppressive thinkers that have written since Baudrillard's time. It is in dialogue with these approaches that we can develop a Baudrillardian approach today to understand without replicating the same mechanisms of oppression that these media—and our entire hyperreal system—propagate, and which they direct against the most marginalized.

In this essay, I challenge Grace's faith in Baudrillard's work to wrest feminist thought from the clutches of hyperreality. Conversely, I argue that Grace's lionization of Baudrillard's theories as a panacea to the problems facing contemporary society is itself a replication of the very model of hyperreality that she, along with Baudrillard, decries. This is because Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum is not only a description of the effects of improved virtual technologies on the elusive concept of reality; it is also the moment where "everything operates in an integrated circuit" (*The Intelligence of Evil* 79), a death by recursion. When Baudrillard is proffered up as the apotheosis of radical theory, such an "integrated circuit" is concretized and the possibility for development is foreclosed. As such, I demonstrate the need to "Forget Baudrillard" borrowing from the title of the second half of *Forget Foucault* that solidified Baudrillard's "excommunicate[ion] from French intellectual circles" (Lotringer).

To argue this, I perform two operations. Firstly, I present Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum arguing that its emergence does not mark the dissipation of the real in favor of the virtual—or the performative—but that it signals the emergence of a single world-view, or "integrated circuit," that is taken as objectively real. I employ this approach to argue that a feminist Baudrillardian reading of the many issues facing gender non-conforming people today have less to do with their merely adopting a hyperreal-veneer, or becoming a model of "sign value" (Grace 157), than it does with the emergence of the simulacrum that naturalizes cis-gender identities and relations.

Secondly, I turn my attention to Sara Ahmed's feminist critique of Baudrillard's work in "his own terms" and how this critique informs a need to push Baudrillard's theories further than he himself pushed them. My focus on Ahmed is motivated by her prominence within both academic and non-academic feminist circles, attesting to the potency of her thought within feminist discourse today. Additionally, her direct engagement with Baudrillard's work welcomes a more thorough interlocution between them. I conclude by suggesting that Baudrillard's theories can be—and have been—used by feminist thought but that they must not be accepted as inviolable lest we participate in the very simulacrum that he so vehemently opposed.

Victoria Grace's Baudrillardian Challenge to Feminist Thought

a. Victoria Grace Reading Baudrillard

Victoria Grace falls victim to this trap of the simulacrum, suggesting that hyperreality is "an era or mode of representation imploding and displacing the real from its location of reference" (33). By succumbing to this trap, she naturalizes so-called "natural real" social formations as opposed to "hyperreal" ones (20), constructing a binary in Baudrillard's work that he himself challenges. Her exposition into Baudrillard's work is incredibly nuanced, however, and demands its own investigation.

For Grace, the crux of Baudrillard's critical project is to diagnose the predicament presented by virtual technologies and the logics of operationality that emerged in the twentieth century. These logics are underwritten by the "code," a "rule that structures the relationship between objects and the relationship of objects to subjects on a scale creating differential points that identify the object" (10). The code delineates the limits of acceptability for the seamless functioning of the system in terms of exchange, power, and identity. It prescribes a

fundamental set of axioms that regulate the possibilities afforded to any person, serving as a simulated reference point from which no one may stray too far. Perhaps counter-intuitively, there is a simultaneous explosion of signification, a move from "equivalence to polyvalence" (9), in tandem with the strengthening of the restrictive code. The code mandates and controls but it also encourages and liberates. The code's two operations are guided by a common desire to evacuate any action of radical potential in favor of the continued functioning of the system itself. It is with this that she draws the distinction between the "natural real," the era that precedes the code, and the "hyperreal" (20), the era of the code.

The "natural real" is the model of social organization that gravitates around symbolic exchange, "one of ambivalence and transformation through circulation" (20), whereas the hyperreal is the code-governed phase predicated entirely upon operationality and perfectibility. The "natural real," as she calls it, is thus an indeterminate, symbolic formation, while hyperreality appears to embody indeterminacy in the free-floating signifiers that inhabit it but is nevertheless bound by a structural commitment to the "code."

In the symbolic, there is "neither essence nor absolute separation of subject from object" (19) which is to say that there is a perpetual antagonism between the subject and the object without definitively constituting one or the other. They are in continuous flux, in a constant duel that "abolishes the law of exchange" (Baudrillard, *Seduction* 126). The dialectical play between subjects and objects never resolves itself in a synthesis as the Hegelian formulation would anticipate. Instead, "it is sworn to extremes, […] sworn to radical antagonism" (Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* 25), and it is through this antagonism that they conjure away all reconciliatory identity markers. They are thus incompatible with the code where "everything is arrested as a coded difference in a universal nexus of relations"

(Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange & Death* 185). Given this, it is all the more difficult to reconcile Grace's bifurcation of the "natural real" from the "hyperreal" given that such a binary (re)constitutes a system of equivalence (the code) that subordinates the hyperreal to the transcendental terrain of the natural real. Indeed, Baudrillard was wary of any clear split between the two, suggesting that even in the age of hyperreality, "at the extreme horizon of technology, something else happens, another game, with other rules. The point is that the constellation of the secret still resists, remains alive" (Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* 82). In hyperreality, we see the maintenance of a duel/dual configuration that revitalizes the antagonism endemic to the symbolic. Grace's characterization of the stakes of Baudrillard's work is then only partly complete. It is not that the hyperreal unequivocally puts the symbolic illusion of the world to death; it is instead that there are forces that are trying to perform such operations although they will, as per Baudrillard's optimism, never succeed.

Science is the one of the foremost forces of hyperreality. It is a "legitimating principle of technical operations on the real and on the world" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange & Death* 160). He goes so far as to label it a "terrorist rationalization" (Baudrillard, *For a Critique* 37), that "infiltrates itself into the genome and into the genetic code to transform the [social] body itself" (Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil* 76). For science to operate, it "requires a real, 'objective' reference within the processes of substance in order to justify it" (61) lest it have no claim to truth. It is in this way that it depends upon a cultural appreciation of the "objective" over the superstitious, and of the material world over the metaphysical world. When Grace aligns the "natural real" against "hyperreality," she is participating in this very appreciation, turning the problem into an "arch-classical, Platonic" distinction between

reality and simulation that Baudrillard denounces as a "serious flaw" (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy of Art* 202).

Grace's reading of Baudrillard's work is rigorous, but there are moments that participate in the same hyperreal framework she and Baudrillard challenges. I now turn to her claim that feminism's failure to properly identify the structural edifice of patriarchal society is symptomatic of her understanding of the simulacrum as the antithesis to the "natural real."

a. Victoria Grace Reading Feminism

In *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading*, Grace critiques feminist thinkers who have dismissed Baudrillard's work because of his romanticizing the idea of femininity. Her polemic reaches deep into Baudrillard's work to demonstrate that his critique of "anatomy as destiny" (*Seduction* 9) is a more radical feminist approach than those of "feminists" who "have argued that (biological) 'sex' has provided a naturalised alibi for 'gender'" (12). Grace turns her critical eye to many different camps of feminist theory to systematically reveal the way their projects mirror the very structures they try to challenge. She suggests that Luce Irigaray's appreciation of the "ontological specificity of 'woman' [that] must be to assume an essence" (51) revitalizes a markedly patriarchal configuration of the man/woman binary; and Judith Butler's extolment of the performative submits gender to "a veritable sea of floating signifiers" (Grace 125) ultimately guided by the logics of hyperreality and the code. Taking aim at these broad camps of feminist thought, she argues that Baudrillard's theories are more feminist than these seminal feminist thinkers. To parse out her challenges to these camps, I attend to them one at a time.

Anatomy as Destiny

In *Seduction,* Baudrillard suggests that Luce Irigaray participates in the structure of patriarchal "'scientific' determinism" (152) because she believes in "sex's reality and in the possibility of speaking sex without mediation" (43). In response, Baudrillard proposes supplanting anatomy with seduction, the superficial "play of signs" (115) that opposes the determinative logic of the code. In signs there are no definitive identities, only antagonism and transformation.

Grace reiterates Baudrillard's criticism that Irigaray's "assumption of the biological, anatomical nature of ontological difference" (60) strengthens the patriarchal commitment to biological determinism. Grace contends that Irigaray restricts the possibilities afforded to both men and women, by linking them to their biology. All gender is then only derivative from the transcendental marker of biology and is a means by which women's bodies are subordinated to men's bodies. Irigaray's project then steadily proceeds towards an impasse where she both wants to repudiate the restrictive pretensions of anatomy as destiny while also claiming it as an original determining category of all things: "[n]o world is produced or reproduced without sexual difference" (Irigaray 178, qtd. in Grace 197). With this, Grace recognizes Irigaray's disavowal of the symbolic, the era in which there were no determining categories but only perpetual flux. Without this, according to Grace, Irigaray is condemned to only reproduce the same patriarchal determining system of anatomy that she criticizes.

Performative as Destiny

From Irigaray and the apparent feminist commitment to anatomy, Grace sets her sights against the poststructuralist approaches to sex and gender indicative of the work of Judith Butler. Butler, Grace argues, differs from Irigaray in her refusal to acknowledge the "political necessity of a project of sexual difference" (60) and instead vies for a politics of the

performative that recognizes gender as the product of "repetitive discursive acts that reiterate and indeed *realise* (in the sense of make real) gender difference" (61). There is no truth of gender related to biological sex in the performative. The performative constitutes the site of biology as itself a product of the repetitive demonstrations of gender that retroactively designate it as a site from which gender is culturally and socially believed to emerge.

According to Grace, Butler's commitment to the performative belies her radical project because it only commits itself to the logic of presentation and signs endemic to hyperreality. The performative is, for Baudrillard, a consequence of the present belief that "nothing is true unless it is desecrated, objectified, stripped of its aura, or dragged onstage" (*Agony of Power* 67), a rendering "more visible than visible: obscenity" (*Fatal Strategies* 30). This is not to leave identity to a radical indeterminism present in the symbolic but instead to allow identity to float freely all the while being secretly tethered to the demands of self-presentation under the aegis of a simulated emancipatory politics of self-expression.

Grace combines her criticism of these two approaches to question if trans identities are "a transgressive force that destabilizes and challenges the gender binary" (117). Drawing upon the influential work of Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, and Judith Halberstam (to name just a few), who have made significant contributions to the trans theory, each contributing specifically to the way that trans people are (pre)figured within the dominant matrix of cis-gender and hetero-normative social relations that permeate today, Grace employs Baudrillard's work to downplay these "transgenderist" beliefs that "reflect uncritically precisely what is happening with the simulation of gender, and accord almost perfectly with the contemporary hegemonic structuration" (121). The violence of Grace's suggestion is striking for three primary reasons. Firstly, it positions trans identities as simply a means to transgress power

relations when, for many—if not all—trans people, their identity as trans portends any political affiliation. Trans people are not trans people to make a political statement. Secondly, the disavowal of trans people's identities as only participating in the hegemonic configuration of gender (as either anatomy as destiny or performative as destiny) ignores the fact that for many trans people their identities are a way by which they may continue to survive in the world. In other words, by framing their existence as a 'failure' to ostensibly challenge hyperreality, it extends the familiar oppressive discourses that shroud their daily lives. And thirdly, it is incredibly ironic for her to employ Baudrillard, a cis-gender man, as the authority on what constitutes appropriate, or properly political, identities.

Beyond the immediate violence of Grace's treatment of trans folks, this approach betrays the overall Baudrillardian trajectory of her text. She re-inscribes the primacy of the performative (under the moniker of the symbolic) that she had challenged in Butler by framing identity as a site of resistance against hegemonic power relations. Moreover, by locating these hyperreal signs in trans identities, she re-establishes the non-Baudrillardian framing of a clear distinction between the "natural real" and the "hyperreal." In her words, "the game of trans is one of a superficial play of appearances" (146), and so it is articulated as the hyperreal 'other' in relation to the 'naturally real' cis-gender identities against which they are compared. This is not entirely due to a mis-interpretation of Baudrillard's work by Grace, however. In *The Transparency of Evil*, he suggests that "a transsexual, or a transvestite" are "the only people left who live through the signs of an overdrawn, rapacious sexuality" (21). They are the consequence, he continues, "on lack of differentiation between sexual poles" (20). Like Grace, Baudrillard's insistence on a 'real' sexuality specified to these "sexual poles" belies his lionization of the symbolic as a site to trouble all determinacy. Baudrillard—and Grace's—

conservative agenda overshadows the radical project thus far espoused by Grace, ultimately re-constituting the very structuration of hyperreality against a transcendentally 'real' reality. James Sares, in a publication in *Transgender Studies Quarterly,* puts the problem succinctly when he writes that

> Baudrillard's reduction of transsexuality to the symbolic realm presumes appearance as domineering the essence of the subject, such that the subject is hollowed of authentic content. Yet Baudrillard produces the very meaninglessness he critiques by hypostatizing the concept of the subject as form of rupture without reflexive critique of its historical and social construction. (160)

Agreed, Baudrillard's work mirrors the very concept of hyperreality and the simulacrum that he tries so desperately to challenge. Does this mean that Baudrillard's work can be of no use to feminist and trans theory? Not necessarily, it just demands a different view of his overall project than the one that Grace provides.

An Alternative Reading of Baudrillard: How Baudrillard can work with feminist thought I have argued elsewhere that Baudrillard's work can be read in conjunction with Butler's theory of performativity to address present forms of scientific discrimination leveled against trans folks (Guignion). To do this demands a departure from the view that the simulacrum is only the moment in which appearance overshadows reality—as Grace seems to suggest. Instead, as I have alluded to thus far, the simulacrum must not be mistaken for an antithesis to reality. As a correlative to Grace's application of Baudrillard's thought, heed the words of Marc Oliver D. Pasco in his plea for the return of Baudrillard's thought today: "The exponential decay and the concurrent metastatic transmutation of the objective, the real and the rational into simulacra is arguably one of the most thought-provoking facts of contemporary

history" (1). Like Grace, Pasco situates the simulacrum as a succeeding organizational framework to reality. They both mistakenly identify the simulacrum, or the hyperreal, as antithetical to reality when reality and the simulacrum are actually one and the same phenomenon. As Baudrillard argues, it "is not then, the real which is the opposite of simulation—the real is merely a particular case of that simulation" (*The Perfect Crime* 16). By contrast, Baudrillard contends that the real conflict is between integral reality and illusion.

Integral reality "operates in an integrated circuit. In the information media - and in our heads too - the image-feedback dominates, the insistent presence of the monitors - this convolution of things that operate in a loop, that connect back round to themselves" (*The Intelligence of Evil* 79). This feedback loop forms a totalizing möbius strip—a perfectly tautological system—that is hermetically sealed. The possibility for objectivity is intensified in this paradigm where the conditions for any given phenomenon can be traced back to a genesis point that has a direct relation to that phenomenon. There is therefore no necessity for the system to be recognized from without—a Hegelian 'other' for example—to confirm the existence of the system itself.

The emergence of this objectivity finds its genesis in modernity where "technological, scientific, economic" reality "relentlessly proceeds on its course to the exclusion of any imaginary order" (204). Integral reality is simply a phase of the project of modernity, the moment where reality becomes more real than real, more objective than objective, more simulacral than the simulacrum. The problem that Baudrillard writes against is thus not the threat that objectivity may vanish, as Pascal and Grace frame it; it is that there will be a profusion of objectivity that will foreclose the possibility for change and that will mark the moment where the "possible itself is no longer possible" (204).

In terms of the trans identities that Grace criticizes as complicit with a system of hyperreality, an alternative Baudrillardian reading would take aim at the reactionary radical feminist disavowal of trans bodies as failing to conform to the 'real' gender binary. Grace is then complicit in the scientific naturalization of gender when she asks if "transgenderism" is "symptomatic of the simulation of gender/sex difference" (132) as though cis-gender identities are somehow more real than trans identities. As Susan Stryker so astutely observes, "science seeks to contain and colonize the radical threat posed by a particular transgender strategy of resistance to the coerciveness of gender: physical alteration of the genitals" (249). Similarly, Cheryl Chase, in commenting on the surgical interventions often imposed on intersex bodies, argues that "[c]utting intersex genitals becomes yet another hidden mechanism for imposing normalcy upon unruly flesh, a means of containing the potential anarchy of desires and identifications within oppressive heteronormative structures" (204). The scientific intervention against non-normative bodies reflects a general societal repulsion of those people and bodies that do not comply with the naturalized beliefs of sex and gender. It is an example of a force that makes the "possible itself […] no longer possible" (204) as Baudrillard solemnly proclaimed. It is strange then that Baudrillard, and Grace that follows him, tacitly speak the language of the same scientific objectivity that they admonish. So, if we are going to use Baudrillard's work, there is a necessity to push it further than he himself did—we must wrest its radical potential from the conservative and reactionary undertones that subtend and limit it.

Sara Ahmed's Feminist Challenge to Baudrillard

For Sara Ahmed, Baudrillard's gravitation towards an ultimately conservative theoretical framework is maintained by his commitment to the subject. Writing during the post-Deleuzo-Guattarian "affective turn," Ahmed's feminist commitment is to both the interrogation of the

European model of subjectivity, and the post-structuralist critiques of that subjectivity. She contends that in Baudrillard's work, the "subject is determined by indeterminacy (rather than anatomy, class, or gender). As such, Baudrillard's postmodernism can be read as a normative and positive reading of the subject, rather than as a rejection of its limits" (81). Rather than oppose the subject—a decidedly Eurocentric construct—Baudrillard re-posits the subject as always already indeterminate, as though the forces of power and knowledge play no significant part in constituting this free-floating subjectivity. By contrast, Ahmed—among other feminists writing against the same traditions—is not trying to re-constitute a steady subject that portends all social and cultural influences. Instead, she recognizes the various forces that delimit this new subjectivity and carefully limit its scope and potential: "They form part of a generalized discursive economy that stabilizes meanings in the form of the delimitation of subject positions" (82). The determining ground of subjectivity subtends the indeterminacy that Baudrillard lauds as a sign of some symbolic residue in the age of hyperreality. Baudrillard's subject is then doomed to mirror rather than challenge the system at hand.

Ahmed's suspicion of the efficacy of Baudrillard's challenge intensifies when she considers the points of contact between Baudrillard's subject and capital in the 20th century onward: "Baudrillard's postmodern vision of signs as proliferating and neutralizing connects with the very nature of money as a signifier which can only quantify, and as such idealizes the very symbolic power of capital itself to displace the possibilities of value and utility" (83). By way of example, Ahmed considers how women's bodies are sexualized in advertising and how this sexualization grounds these bodies within the discursive matrix of bodies-as-commodities. There is thus not only a proliferation of the overt sexualization of women's bodies in visual media, but also a very structured attempt to ground bodies for the sake of capitalist

accumulation. To grapple with these mechanisms demands an investigation of not only the broad hyperreal shift that Baudrillard writes of, but of the structures of power and knowledge that constitute certain bodies as confineable while allotting some semblance of freedom to others.

In theorizing subaltern voices, Gayatri Spivak's work on the status of European intellectualism contributes to this conversation. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak takes aim at Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault whose consideration of the "S/subject" is "curiously sewn together into a transparency by degenerations," and "belongs to the exploiter's side of the international division of labor" (280). Spivak does not mention Baudrillard's work but he could easily be transposed into her critique. In identifying the transgressive potential found in the play of indeterminate signs, he reifies the dominant structure that subjugates some subjects while liberating others. Ahmed develops a critical idiom to identify the operations that make such privileged indeterminacy possible in *Queer Phenomenology* when she articulates that cis-gender white men possess the "ability to move through the world without losing their way" (139), and enjoy the privilege of transparency.

So, when Baudrillard highlights the importance of symbolic indeterminacy against hyperreal indeterminacy, he fails to recognize the way that some people benefit greatly from hyperreal indeterminacy while others are exploited by it. What is more, just because symbolic exchange precedes the hyperreal does not mean that it precedes the forms of oppression immanent to hyperreality. Marcel Mauss illustrates this in his seminal investigation of how some tribal communities across the globe have historically traded women like they were objects: "As soon as two clans existed in a society, they necessarily contracted and exchanged between one another not only their women (exogamy) and their rituals, but also their goods, at

least at certain times of the year and on certain special occasions" (185). In that moment, women are constituted and frozen as objects to be exchanged. Thus, we see a fundamental connection between the symbolic and the hyperreal in the societal use of women as a means of accruing power—be it in the form of hierarchical status or wealth. The symbolic then appears like an illusory foray into a more equitable cultural paradigm. In fact, I would hazard that its reification presents an even more dire alternative precisely because of its promise to end all determinations—a seductive promise given the incessant coding and over-coding that permeates daily life by big-data miners, and global, digital capitalism.

Baudrillard's work can be used by feminism insofar as it challenges the restrictive notion of "anatomy as destiny"; it is skeptical of the play of signs to mount an effective challenge to the present proliferation of signs under the auspices of the accumulation of capital. His challenge, far from a panacea as Grace describes it, is only useful as a preliminary endeavor. When Ahmed moves from his thought to consider the ways that power writes and determines subjects, she is assuming that the subject is not-determined in the first instance, that they are somewhat of a blank slate upon which power and knowledge can inscribe themselves. Seeing as Baudrillard's work accentuates this moment—the moment of undecidability prior to the types of coding indicative of these systems (a coding that reaches its apotheosis in hyperreality)—he provides a template for the immediate refusal of anatomy and the play of signs as destiny. What is more, this assumption tacitly troubles the implicit assumptions maintained in some scientific circles pertaining to sexual or racial determinism. Although his project might mirror the same determinative qualities of hyperreality, especially in terms of the place of women in symbolic exchange, it can be used as a theoretical supplement to the

monolithic forces of capitalist and scientific patriarchy exerting themselves in floating signification and biological determinism respectively.

The potency of Ahmed's feminist critique is that she, as Grace states, takes Baudrillard "on his own terms," and these terms present the various contradictions in his work that undermine the efficacy of his radical project. Ultimately, Ahmed finds little use for Baudrillard's work, preferring instead a purely "feminist approach" that conducts "an analysis of how power relations are stabilized in specific historical moments (in the empirical form of male dominance)" (91). However, Ahmed's feminist critique represents a surprising commitment to a key component of Baudrillard's thought: the refusal of allotting primacy to a single voice to explain and remedy the current issues facing society today. This is undoubtedly a stronger commitment to the form of Baudrillard's theories than their content, but it speaks to a consistent current that runs through Baudrillard's work: the challenge against all totally integrated systems. And this demands a death of Baudrillard's thought as per his own prescription: "When we lose the possibility of death, of the end, of playing with the end, then we are very dead. And the whole system has managed to deprive us of this possibility" ("Baudrillard's List" 170). For an approach to be properly Baudrillardian, it must be prepared to leave Baudrillard, or to "Forget Baudrillard," and Ahmed's feminist critique does just that.

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"You Are Here": On Driving with Baudrillard through the Desert

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In the very act of road-tripping in *America*, Baudrillard models the cobbled-togetherness of an American identity:

> the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert. Thus, the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move. (55)

I find my experience is the same when searching for locations to film and photograph. As I bounce around on dirt roads I wonder if something will appear. The freedom of movement in the desert encourages me to look, make, and move. If I stay too long, I am no longer passing through. In Baudrillard's observations on America, the road is the thread that connects place and people, providing glimpses of local color. If Baudrillard drove through this desert today, he'd find these once passive connecting roads now swirl within larger cities, having grown into self-sustaining desert islands. The freeway has become an insulated, closed-network system that transports Salt Lake to Vegas—or worse, Los Angeles to Los Angeles—and no place in-

between. By contrast, small desert towns like Wendover still live and die by constant thoroughfare movement. With no rivers, the flow of road is the only life-sustaining feature. It pulls us through out of necessity, desperation, and curiosity. The sublimity produced by such steady and uninterrupted movement in the desert is the catalyst behind my video work, *Coming 'Round the Mountain* (see fig. 1).

It has been over 30 years since the English translation of Jean Baudrillard's *America* was published in 1988, but I find myself rendering it in new terms when I drive through Utah's West Desert. I see what he saw, but no longer in the places he saw them. Now, only the remote and isolated locales remain aligned with his original observations.

Baudrillard's road trip diary documents his travels across the United States and lyrically recounts his observations on and analysis of what it might mean to be American. Baudrillard assesses how this "cataclysmic" place has been molded by time and space, history and money, and how those variables in turn mold the people living here (4). Baudrillard spends much of his writing in *America* logging his travels through the quintessential western landscape of the United States as a means to flesh out the undeniably American connection that exists between people and place. Early in the text, but present throughout, Baudrillard precisely unpacks the "equal and opposite" magic of Las Vegas and Salt Lake City (3) as an example of the harmonious American dichotomy. Since Baudrillard's journey in the late 80's, the relationship between these two desert cities, and the desert itself, has become less oppositional and more congruous: the large cities have now all but devoured the surrounding landscape and adjacent towns, bleeding together in the name of new metropolitan areas and growth. The growth-for-growth's-sake mentality, combined with the undying American dedication to creating and recreating "artificial paradises" (Baudrillard 8), which Baudrillard

had already noticed, has essentially made Salt Lake and Las Vegas indistinguishable in their paradisiacal nature. Driving now through isolated rural desert locales, however, I find that Baudrillard's claims indeed still apply. Here, his observations remain intact, preserved in their remoteness by the time and space of the desert.

Wendover is a town on the Utah-Nevada border. Technically, it's two towns: Wendover, Utah, and West Wendover, Nevada. This Janus-faced locale full of run-down casinos offers a strange and somehow reverent mimicry of Las Vegas, its Sin City twin to the south. However, because of its isolation, Wendover has maintained within itself certain dis-locations that other, more connected, desert cities (Phoenix, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Salt Lake, Palm Springs) have lost to the expansion and homogenization described above. Solitude, I argue, is the umbilical cord of dis-located places. Within this solitude the residents of these places take pride in remoteness, resolute in their autonomy. Like a shoulder joint out of socket, dis-located places and people preserve their identities with and without disconnection. Namely, Wendover has kept intact what Baudrillard calls "the power of pure open space, the kind you find in the desert" (135). The power Baudrillard references here is "The power of the desert form: it is the erasure of traces in the desert, of the signified of signs in the cities, of any psychology in bodies. An animal and metaphysical fascination—the direct fascination of space, the immanent fascination of dryness and sterility" (Baudrillard 135). In other words, there remains something wild, surreal, and subversive enveloping this small gambling town. There is still a chance you'll see something you don't want to see. This is the quality people refer to when describing their nostalgia for "Old Las Vegas."

Having already bloomed, there is nothing left of the weirdness, charm, and potential violence in accrescent cities. If I no longer feel any reason to stop in Las Vegas or Salt Lake, it

is perhaps because I know there is another exit, and it won't make any difference. It is a matter of convenience *not* to stop. These expansive cities no longer require the traveler to top-off the gas tank or check the coolant in their overheated engines because the distances now are interconnected by highways and superhighways. In Wendover, there remains a risk in not stopping because, like an oasis, it appears as quickly as it disappears back into "dryness and sterility" (135).

It is this same arid fascination that motivates me to work in the desert, the way harshness impacts human behavior, tricking senses and confusing relationships. It is a place formed by chance and movement: by freeways, flash floods, fuel pumps, and fossils. When I make artwork in the desert, it is this aleatory pushback that requires the quickness of the camera, a fear of missing something in this slow place if I'm not fast enough. This tension echoes dis-location, creating harmony in that everything—including me—is perfectly out of place.

Fig. 1. Still from *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, Levi Jackson, 2018. Single channel video. Modern West Gallery, Salt Lake City, UT.

In the video *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, a man dressed as a cowboy drives through the desert in an old pickup truck, coasting as if on rails. The teal truck matches the color of the empty sky, filling most of the camera frame except for the occasional glimpse of green grass when the truck and tracking viewer are misaligned. Trancelike, he looks only west toward Wendover, stalwartly moving in space. When I drive through the desert, the flatness creates an illusion of everything slowed down, which I attempt to capture in the video. The distance combined with the absence of landmarks is transfixing. I find myself constantly checking the speedometer against my own perception of speed, disbelieving my instruments. In *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, the shot is tight and little is recognizable beyond the truck. The truck appears as fixed to the road as the viewer is to the driver. As the cowboy travels, white clouds and sunlight are projected onto the truck, dis-locating the driver, truck, landscape, and viewer. The soundtrack amplifies this daze. By significantly slowing down the melody from the American folk song, "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain," the song, played by solo cello, acts as a lullaby. An added angelic crescendo appears each time the cowboy is touched by projected sunlight, momentarily pulling the viewer and the cowboy in and out of the low hum of travelling.

In *America*, Baudrillard describes driving as "a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (10). Without signs and without places to stop the desert makes it easy to forget. Truly a feeling of no return, "It is a sort of slow-motion suicide" (Baudrillard 7). The Cowboy looks West, toward Wendover, unseen by driver or audience. Wendover is like a dream that, upon waking, can't be articulated. But that doesn't make it any less *there*.

Throughout the video, the surface of the truck takes on a projection of clouds, blurring and flipping the earth and the sky, oscillating between becoming, blinding, and breaking the horizon line. The sky matches the paint, the projector bulb produces the sun, the truck and driver seem both "right now" and "back then." With this technological apparatus, I try to capture the phenomenon of deterritorialization Baudrillard describes in *America* when taking a flight from London to Los Angeles:

> Deterritorialization begins with the disconnection of night and day. When their division is no longer a matter of time, but of space, altitude, and speed, and occurs cleanly, as if vertically, when you pass through the night as if it were a cloud, so fast that you can see it, as if it were a nearby object revolving around the earth, or by contrast, when it is reduced to nothing, the sun remaining at the same point in the sky for all twelve hours of the flight, then this already marks the end of our space-time, that same enchanted reality which will be that of the West. (137)

I believe the effect Baudrillard describes here can take place not only in flight, but in desert travelling, whenever movement alters our sense of place and time. Is there any difference between flying in the air at 500mph and driving across the desert at 100mph? A friend of mine once worked as a server at a casino in West Wendover. He lived in Salt Lake City and would shuttle, via a service called the "Party Bus," 122.9 miles across the desert each morning and night. I've never been on the party bus, but when I imagine the commute, it's impossible to think of the light and the silence—the monotony—as anything but evangelical.[1] In the video, the cowboy's quest has the same effect.

Coming 'Round the Mountain gets its final edge from what Baudrillard describes as "that brutal instant which reveals that the journey has no end. That there is no longer any

reason for it to come to an end. Beyond a certain point, it is movement itself that changes" (11). *Coming 'Round the Mountain* is eight minutes of an anonymous cowboy slowly gliding across the desert, intended to be viewed on repeat. Much like watching a rerun, in the desert there is an entrancing discomfort in waiting for something new to happen. Watching a rerun gives you permission to forget what you know and start searching. This structure mimics desert driving by calling into question space and time, when someone inevitably asks from the backseat, "are we there yet?" In Baudrillard's terms, "It takes this surreality of the elements to eliminate nature's picturesque qualities, just as it takes metaphysics of speed to eliminate the natural picturesqueness of travel (9). In the video's ritualistic repetitions, the viewer is pushed to find the nuances and changes that only appear after forgetting what they're looking at, seeing through it to a new place.

When moving this way through the desert, the "desert is no longer a landscape, it is a pure form produced by the abstraction of all others" (Baudrillard 137). This entropic abstraction is the tool and driving force of dis-located places. Here, it is the chance created by slowness that gives way to abstraction, and abstraction gives way to meaning. Right in front of you—just like a mirage—it answers back from the driver's seat, promising: "You are here."

Notes

[1] Here, I mean to evoke an older meaning of the term "evangelical": the root of *euangelizesthai*, to "bring good news," is *angelos*, "messenger," or angel. I'm also thinking here of Benjamin's remarks on the simultaneous movement and stasis of Klee's *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn and edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 253-264).

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