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

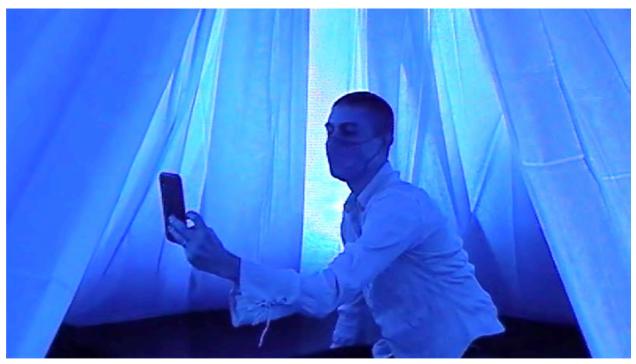and the smartphone within one another until they are utterly indistinguishable.

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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