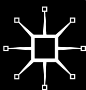

The Aesthetics and Politics of the Online Self

A Savage Journey into the Heart of Digital Cultures

Edited by
Donatella Della Ratta · Geert Lovink · Teresa Numerico · Peter Sarram

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Donatella Della Ratta
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I would like to wager the following: to understand fear, loathing and the online self, we need to apprehend algorithmic schemes of friendship and neighborliness, correlation and authenticity. That is, if there seemed to be significant and largely unforeseen spikes post-2016 in hatred and anger, it is due to how people are divided in name of love. These practices,

however, are not new: they are legacies of twentieth century eugenics and segregation. Thus, to grasp the current situation, we need to understand the history and impact of correlation and homophily—the drivers behind Big Data hype.

Gabriella (Biella) Coleman is a full professor in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University. She is the author of two books on computer hackers and the founder and editor of Hack Curio, a video portal into the cultures of hacking.

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Fear and Loathing of the Online Self: A Savage Journey into the Heart of Digital Cultures

Donatella Della Ratta, Geert Lovink, Teresa Numerico, and Peter Sarram

Introduction

> "I like my selfie like I like my coffee: a momentary comfort in the midst of all my suffering." Kim Kierkegaardashian

According to Shosana Zuboff, "the first modernity supressed the growth and expression of self in favour of collective solutions, but by the second modernity, the self is all we have."[1] In this book, we ask what the state of

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the arts of the self is in the digital age. Where is the online self after all our identities have been digitized, traced, and hacked? There is a broad consensus that the self is never one, taking on multiple shapes and sizes. At the same time, digital technologies seem ideal to pinpoint us to one essentialist identity. In our current, past-Trump-Brexit position our culture seems to constantly bounce back and forth between these two poles—with in between the image of the self. In the same sentence we praise its weight and depth of the online self, while complaining about its empty vanity side.

This anthology is the result of a two-day conference entitled Fear and Loathing of the Online Self, organized by Roma Tre, John Cabot University, and the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, held in Rome on May 22–24, 2017.[2] The conference dealt with multiple aspects of online identity—cultural, political, and aesthetic—and explored the state of the online self by raising questions about its status as a focal point of contemporary power/networks. Is the online self merely a product of software predictability and viral marketing? Is there any space left for self-determination? Or should we search elsewhere for new forms of resistance by changing our political categories and perspectives? Which contradictions are at play? How and where can we locate the spaces of performativity of the online self?

Critical political-economic readings of platform capitalism do not explain nor grasp the variety of online subjectivity. There is a growing gap between the obsessive quest for measurability, big data, and algorithmic regimes (such as AI/bots), and critical investigations of the emotional scope of the online self, from anger and anxiety to vanity and cold cynicism. We need to fill this gap and bring them back together. If a humanities approach of Internet studies nurtured by artistic and activist practices aims to survive the "big data" onslaught from the social sciences, then it is vital to ask what the citizen-as-user wants. To portray the population as (innocent or guilty) victims of the data monopolies is, politically speaking, a dead-end street.

The cynical condition rules: we know we're under surveillance, yet we continue to click, like, love, and share ourselves online as usual. We are told by concerned experts and libertarians that our privacy "matters" and we want to believe it; yet it silently confers a guilty stigma upon another vital need, to engage socially and culturally with others. While some preach the offline escape as a way out, most of us are so deeply invested in the everyday social media life that it is inconceivable for most of us

to leave Facebook and the like. The recent so-called scandal surrounding the Cambridge Analytica revelations and the forced reassessment of Facebook's self-image and ideological framework and the discussions that swirled around it are just another case in point. These paradoxes are not born only out of desire but necessity: networking and self-sharing has become imperative for successfully managing the double binds of the immaterial labor economy. Instead, we'd rather deal with peculiar disfunctions, such as addiction, depression, and solitude generated by hyper-connection and lack of connections.

The texts we brought together are both a product of, and look back at, the recent age of the selfie. According to Google trends the selfie search term started rising in 2012 and reached its peak mid-2016.[3] Since then it declined as a hype yet can still be considered a mass practice of the online billions. While manifestations of the online self may come and go, following the latest trends, away from Tumblr and Flickr, moving on to Snapchat and TikTok, should be as flexible, go with the flow and admire the plasticity of self that can take a thousand and one manifestations? Or should we rather presume that the core of the (Western) self is a primordial entity? Is the selfie an empty container and a mere by-product of the (smart phone) technology or should we read more into it? What's at stake here? We may think what we like, but a "pure" judgment of the self(ie) has consequences. Can we speak of a "will to selfie"? Do selfies address an audience or is it, as often complained, merely a narcissistic act, whose only goal it is to communicate back to the maker. And, who cares about this in the first place? Do we feel bad to admit that these images only broadcast to ourselves? The editors of this anthology have set the goal to overcome such predictable tensions and prejudices and dig deeper.

How much free room do we have to design new identities? What aesthetic and philosophical paths and patterns does meme distribution hint at? What is the role of theory and criticism, if any, in the everchanging yet endless production of the latest user affordances, from dating sites, Tinder swipes, and Snapchat lenses, to Pokemon-Go? Can we still attempt to design new modes of subjectivity, or has our role withdrawn to a mere Cassandra-like gloom and doom prediction of digital catastrophes, while start-ups (read: future monopolies) have all taken over the cool business of designing and shaping the online self?

It is easy to diagnose the selfie as a symptom of a growing narcissism of our daily digital obsessions. But how do we get beyond the

predictable split between the politically correct assessment of empowerment (of young girls) against the nihilist reading of self-promotion and despair? Does criticism of today's photography of the everyday life always have to end up giving medical prescriptions and recipes of wellbeing? What could a materialist reading of large databases and facial recognition techniques (including protection) that goes beyond media archaeology (the historical approach) and the everchanging pop gestures involve and say? Can we still talk about the liberation of the self in the age of digital self-generation of the images?

Artists play an important role in the anticipation, and critique, of new modes of the self. What role does the artistic imagination play beyond the creative industries paradigm? How can artistic and creative avant-garde practices help disrupt the trite quantitative approach and the dogma of the algorithm in defining modes and moods of the online self? What's at stake in the quantified self and its practices? The essays in the collection aim to investigate the relationship between the (in)ability to control our lives and the measurability embedded in socially mediated technologies. What separates a (properly) artistic imagination and the aesthetic imagination of the online curators of selfie-constructed personas? Are contemporary critical paradigms merely reproducing an understanding of online practices that are aligned with the requirements of corporations?

In his 2019 autobiography *Permanent Record*, Edward Snowden confesses that "it is hard to have spent so much of my life trying to avoid identification, only to turn around completely and share 'personal disclosures' in a book." The intelligence community had taught its workers to become "a blank-page personality upon which to inscribe secrecy and the art of imposture. You train yourself to be inconspicuous, to look and sound like others." The task was to wear the same ordinary clothes as everyone else. "The difference is," he explains, "you do this on purpose: normalcy, the ordinary, is your cover." Snowden describes this type of identity split as "human encryption. As in any process of encryption, the original material—your core identity—still exists, but only in a locked and scrambled form." The result is knowing more about others and less about yourself. "After a time, you might forget about your likes and even your dislikes. You can lose your politics, along with any and all respect for the political process that you might have had. Everything gets subsumed by the job, which begins with a denial of character and ends with a denial of conscience."[4]

In this anthology we are investigating the tension between the (visible) "banality" of the selfie vs. the mysterious secret of the mask (which as we go to print has taken on another series of connotations and implications) and invite the reader to see the politics of the quasi-transparent online selfie and its anonymous crypto counterpart as a political and aesthetic continuum of possibility, not as exclusive opposites. Selfies may destroy as much meaning and ethics as its masked counterpart. What happens if we start to see selfies themselves as "human encryption"? "Normies" do not hide behind their mask but behind their public image. Take this description: "Imagine a millennial. What are they wearing? Skinny jeans. Ironic fast fashion. Maybe that sweatshirt with Kale written like Yale that Beyoncé wore in 2014. Quay sunglasses. The ones you buy off Instagram that are so reflective that when you take a selfie you can see the iPhone in the mirror finish. Of course the millennial is taking a selfie. She's so narcissistic! What else is she doing? (She's definitely a girl.) She's on a ho-float in a pool. It's a giant rainbow unicorn. She's taking a selfie again, but this time in a bikini, with perfect, washboard abs. She got them by eating lots of kale."[5]

Ever since the selfie hit mainstream culture, the strict formatting of this auto-photographic act has been reduced to the predictable genre of the duck-face, car and gym selfie, with the equally predictable resentful judgment, which says: "Please refrain from letting the world know you think you're hot." Instead we'd like to see categories such as self-image, looking-glass self, and the ideal self as everchanging products of a cultural whirlwind that constantly invites the self to reposition itself—a process that in itself is tiring and exhausts us to no end.

Do we need to save the self from its technical self-image? Now that the knowledge of the perfect self-image has been democratized, we are facing a hyper-inflation of authenticity effect. What's a world without imperfection? Users get fed up with the high-manicured image feeds and want to add more grain to their photos so that they can also, for once, look bad. The love for unfiltered low-production images is of all times. With every "personal" detail about us being mapped, stored, and shared, we are in danger of emptying the precious and vulnerable remainders of the self, up to the level of radical nihilism, leading to (auto)destruction on massive scale. What is techno-indifference? What happens once the self is trapped, when there is no more dialectics between discipline and liberation and everything becomes flat, when the self is no longer appreciated because of its depth and difference?

"For my generation, people are more willing to be who they are and not make up a fake identity," says Instagram contributor Reese Blutstein. "We are trying to show a real person doing cool things as a real person, not trying to create a persona that isn't actually you."[6] Take the online project *This Person Does Not Exist*, produced by an AI, a generative adversarial network.[7] Once employed, administrated, and employed by an organized network of activists, could start to "pollute" the dataset of human faces with non-existing identities. So far we only had pseudonyms and fake accounts, but this project takes the selfie to a next level.

As Boris Groys describes, "In Kandinsky's view, art is a medium for conveying emotions. Rather than portraying external facts, art should visualize and transport inner states of the mind. Consequently, Kandinsky makes 'inner necessity' the criterion for evaluating art: a picture is successful if it adequately expresses specific emotions and moods. And if a picture does this, it is of no consequence whether or not it is a faithful rendering of external reality."[8] For Kandinsky, Groys explains, "the emotions and moods reside not in the person but in the picture." This has got nothing do whether the artist actually experiences the mood in question. "The artist is a specialist in the transmission of emotions, not their subject." Works of art are not based on inspiration that comes from inside. In the future, according to Kandinsky, the artistic portrayal of emotions can be created by calculation and thus, can also be learned and taught. What happens when we apply these ideas to the realm of selfies and the online self?

As Sybil Prentise on the Berlin collaborative filtering website New Models asks, what happens when "the future is entirely subsumed by 'sharing' economies and platforms, and where all paid labour has been reduced to the service-industry's mise en abyme. The body is impeccable, the codes are deployed just so, but the penthouse Airbnb ends tomorrow and the chauffeurs keep asking to be rated 5 stars. Welcome to fully automated luxury whatever."[9] In New Models, Prentise expands: "People find my voice authentically hypnotic; it's remixed a lot. I'll take ownership of having the linguistic tendencies of a valley girl, but in 2018, we upgrade: it's 'Valspeak' now. If you catch me on the phone, I'm exclusively communicating via WhatsApp, sending mini audio clips to friends. This involves more engagement than texting but less commitment than a regular phone conversation. When everything is mediated via voice memos, I'm in boss mode."[10] This could be considered the "audio selfie." The ultimate communication control today is the online

self pushed via private communication: p2p selfies. Contrast this with the anonymity cult of very much public 8chan image board: “Anonymity is key: it means there is no incentive to follow social norms. It also means that belonging to the community entails performance. With its users an anonymous mass, free from the effects of individuality—shame, in particular—Chan culture forms organically. The bigoted argot that emerged serves to denote in-group status: taking offence is for outsiders.”[11]

So, what’s the opposite of the Selfie System, its shadow? In her essay *Erotology* III: Categories of Desire for Faces Anne Boyer describes several ways to make a stony expression break. She asks questions true and well outside of the known selfie discourse. “What is sadness without tears? Or rage with no flashing eyes? Those humans who are attractive the rigor with which they self-cultivate their impenetrability. The experts at facial impassivity are the hard-scientists of themselves.”[12] What is the unmoved face in the age of its digital reproductivity? Can we speak of a “surprised look” in a situation where everything is presumed staged, filtered, and enhanced? Everyone can be photogenic.[13] Boyer calls these faces the “poetry of the wrong”: “The old behave like the young, and the young are too worried to move. Pilotless weapons have the names of birds, so why shouldn’t faces, also, lead away from the facts?”.[14]

Let’s dig deeper and ask what the status of the subject is. According to Achille Mbembe there are no more workers, only laboring nomads. “If yesterday’s drama of the subject was exploitation by capital, the tragedy of the multitude today is that they are unable to be exploited at all. They are abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of a ‘superfluous humanity’. Capital hardy needs them anymore to function. The subject starts to float. A new form of psychic life is emerging, one based on artificial and digital memory and on cognitive models drawn from the neurosciences and neuroeconomics. With little distinction remaining between the psychic reflexes and technological reflexes, the human subject becomes fictionalized as ‘an entrepreneur of the self’. This subject is plastic and perpetually called on to reconfigure itself in relation to the artifacts of the age.”[15] Mbembe concludes: “The new subject differs in many ways from the tragic and alienated figure of early industrialization. First and foremost, he is a prisoner of desire. His pleasure depends almost entirely on his capacity to reconstruct his private life publicly, to turn it into viable merchandise and put it up for sale.”[16] The fusion of capitalism and animism, says Mbembe, implies a “distinct possibility that human beings will be transformed into animate things made of coded digital data.”[17] We could call

selfie-culture an early, easy-to-share, still photography stage in development, geared toward platforms such as Flickr, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram, waiting to be animated, becoming alive, as proven by the rising popularity of Snapchat and TikTok.

In the age of social media the politics of the self has been boiled down to the right of "dividual" selves to become many versus the power of authorities to enforce a singular so-called "real" identity, fixated in the profile. What does it mean when we say that there is not one but multiples selves? Luce deLire answers: "The question is not 'Are you in a long-term relationship?' You've always been in various long-term relationships anyway. You are in long-term relationships with virtual aspects of yourself, experiencing updates and embodiments in other people, but also in things, etc. You consist of clusters and swarms of aspects of swarms of clusters etc. ad infinitum. These are permeable with and for … you are a mess, a problem right from the start: Something always exceeds you, in yourself and in others, your selves have many covers, many ways—you are transient, surely have been. Maybe you stabilized yourself. But that is already a response to that haunting fragility they make you call 'life.'".[18]

As Donatella Della Ratta writes in the essay included in this collection, the myth of any and all singularities have always permeated the various mantras coming out of the "Silicon Valley tech evangelists and entrepreneurs." The belief in "the authentic self as godlike" arrived to them from the California counter-culture in a move far too often believed to be one from the underground to the mainstream when in fact these ideas were always part and parcel of a restructuring of capitalist relations. However much any form of "authenticity" pertaining to the self is problematical from a theoretical and political perspective in this case it ends up being captured by the very mode of subjectivation and production that a software and algorithmic logic requires, flattening difference into sameness, imposing coherence, permanence, and reliability at the expense of ambiguity and variability.

Writing in the middle of a crisis that has further eroded presence, as we confront a global pandemic that requires (and/or imposes) prohibitions and prescriptions such issues become all the more urgent and critical, requiring an analytical capacity that should be informed by the various questions raised in the present collection as these will form the basis from which to searchingly evaluate the novel relation which will be established between an online and a "real" self as a consequence of the social

rethinking forced on us by lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, and zoomed in participation.

The following essays expand and focus on the different aspects of these complex processes that involve individuation within the social and political spaces of networks. The three sections will each approach a number of these problematics from a different perspective.

The first section addresses the politics of algorithmic representation, by illustrating how the self is produced and performatively oriented by the organization of digital communication.

There are different layers of the representation that deal with the building of the self in terms of authenticity, difference, homophily, distance, algorithmic structure, and negotiation.

According to Wendy Chun "Homophily sits at the fold between network structure and individual agency." The building of differences and similarities is based on habits in classification and on past events to anticipate the future. The algorithmic ambition of creating clusters and populate them is intertwined with interpretation. What does it mean to be similar, to be a friend, to share geo-localization attributes? All these categories are the effect of a subjective judgment, and the consequences of the algorithmic decisions have a prescriptive output on the real condition of people caught in the correlation process. The identification cannot rely on authenticity, but it forces the self into a representation, with a feedback effect on real feelings and even on self-perception in some cases. The outcome of living in segregated areas is interpreted according to the narrative of desire of homophily and to the feeling of belonging to a group with which we share ideals. The discursive dispositive that results in the algorithmic classification process is putting upside down the correlation effect using the escape of homophily to ignore necessity and a lot of other causes that produced segregation results. By avoiding consulting reasons for attributing a cluster, it is possible to bypass explanation of situations, while limiting the description only to formal repetitions and hypothesized natural inclinations. The self is built in this technical context, but the outcome of such an algorithmic decision-making process should be balanced and contained and not superimposed above reality. However, in practice there is nothing that can provide a burden against the abusive algorithmic interpretation.

Big Data in Behar's opinion transforms the self in the abstract bigness that creates an imperceptible and generic reality. In the end such a process produces illegibility, because all distinctions disappear,

like Norman Bombardini—one of David Foster Wallace's character—who tries to swallow the entire world, after failing to be on a diet. Being fat, he wants to include everything in himself. This character is evoked as the symbol of the indistinction, which is the effect of the desire for abstraction and profiling within Big Data. How is it possible to keep the self from the indistinction of the bigness? This is the question that moves Behar's exploration.

Preisker and Bifo are more interested in the transformation of the self, due to the centrality of representation and distancing produced by the network. Preisker focuses on the online self in the political scenario, trying to establish how political subjects depend on their digital environment and how it is possible to intervene on the network in order to influence subjective political performativity with respect to reality.

Bifo investigates how distance and virtual reality are changing the way we understand being here and there at the same time. The online presence is not linked to where body life happens. The central interest of the paper is the transformation of experience, due to the introduction of virtual reality in the digital world. The network is not only where we can get information but offers a new way of making experiences, seeing, observing and living. The Bergsonian duration is involved in our virtual presence online. The concept of immersive reality, though, introduces a new step in the meaning of mediation. The perception of the senses can be governed by a reality which is completely created by engineers, in order to fulfill our desires. What happens to online subjectivity when our life experience is arranged immersively as a computational layer? What happens when experience occurs at distance from the body and exercises completely the feeling of our possible death? These questions are left open but they underline the centrality of representation not only in understanding and knowledge, but also in producing an ontology of the self.

The online self is produced, reproduced, and performed by its digital representation strategies, and this is true, no matter if the representation acts at the level of big data profiling and algorithmic decision-making, or if it involves the online presence of the subject itself exerting self-representation strategies or living an immersive environment.

The second section concentrates on the question of aesthetics, design, and visuality. The different essays attempt to engage and ask whether and which contemporary critical paradigms can effectively engage artistic and aesthetic imaginations as they pertain to the online self or whether

these are inevitably and merely reproducing an understanding of online practices that are aligned with the requirements of digital corporations (and/or the state). The contributors, from different perspectives and methodological approaches, all attempt to break down boundaries between different lines of inquiry and reveal the ways in which contemporary networked and social technologies challenge the binary categories traditionally used to investigate aesthetic forms and forms of collectivities, agency and control, visibilities and invisibilities.

How can artistic and creative avant-garde practices or a particular look informed by these, help disrupt the well-worn quantitative approaches and a belief in the algorithm so prevalent in defining and configuring the online self or help in complicating the political use of the images from the perspective of power? Again, from different points, the essays by the authors in this section ask whether contemporary critical paradigms end up merely reproducing an understanding of online practices as aligned with the requirements of corporations or of the logic of the state and offer ways to complicate them in the service of liberated praxis. As we remarked, aesthetic inquiry and artists play an important role in the anticipation, and critique, of new modes of the self as do close critical analyses from an aesthetic and formal perspective of digital artifacts, be they maps, social media campaigns, video works, or pedagogical practices.

In this regard, Rebecca Stein's and Fabio Cristiano and Emilio Distretti's essays take as their theater of operations the space radiating from the Israel-Palestine conflict. In different ways, and yet with a number of points of convergence, they look at the tensions that arise at the intersection of different sorts of digital practices and social processes.

Stein's essay revolves around the paradox of how, while cameras proliferate in the occupation context, bringing with them the hypervisibility of state violence, there is a diminished willingness to recognize and contend with this image of violence within Israel itself and looks at the strategies employed to render opaque and illegible what is there in the myriad images themselves. It is through what she calls the "fraudulence charge," the indictment of the images as fake that these operations of power work. The charge literally works to semiotically reconfigure the images, transforming these from effectively being a visual archive of state violence with the potential of growing viral on social media to something that merely discounts them as examples of "Palestinian theatrics" (Pallywood) bringing them back in line with the dominant ideologies working within the framework of the state ideologies of Israel.

This play of the potential for hypervisibility and the attempts at control through a semiotic reconfiguration producing invisibility is also present in Cristiano and Distretti's "Toward an Aesthetics by Algorithms: Palestinian Cyber and Digital Spaces at the Threshold of (In)visibility." By looking at different types of images that simultaneously produce visibility and invisibility, enforce control and allow for resistance, surveille and erase, they map the ways in which these infrastructures of (in)visibility work across social media spaces and digital maps. The algorithms that guide the production of these visuals are at the service of forms of control, by making Palestinian users and contents hyper-visible, while at the same time, prescriptively, actively work to delete Palestine itself from these same digital spaces. As they write "acting at the threshold of the (in)visible, algorithms do not only enact surveillance, but they also inform the creation of an aesthetics of disappearance." The authors thus complicate the identification of invisibility as a strategy of resistance by introducing their concept of aesthetics by algorithms as a form of organizing.

Natalie Bookchin's essay takes its cue from her own art practice and a series of video works she created between 2008 and 2017. In these works, Bookchin investigates our increased dependence on networked technologies for fostering different forms of interaction while these tools' consequentiality shifts as the social context in which they operate has started to erode in a spiraling of crisis. In a way, the paradox of intimacy that Bookchin investigates is also reflected in Mitra Azar's essay. Focusing on what he identifies as the Algorithmic Facial Image (AFI), a machinic selfie, an image generated by algorithmic technologies over the face, Azar argues for the need to take apart the self-evidence of the principles that assert the uniqueness of a face. This principle aligns with certain humanistic ideals with the requirements of face-tracking technologies and their codes of identification while being offset by the abundance of face-tweaking and re-shaping apps that seem to function on exactly the opposite principle, namely, a face's malleability and hackability. In Azar's reflection the face turns into the site where contradictory regimes of truth coexist in a form which keeps an appearance of immediacy while hiding layers of algorithmic complexity, reflecting on the ways in which this regime of truth relate to processes of "datafication" and value extraction.

Finally, Ana Peraica and Donatella Della Ratta more specifically concentrate on the selfie as artifact and as self-presentation. While their approach diverges–one from a visual culture and art historical framework the other from an ethnographic and pedagogical one—both of their essays

work to introduce the complex traditions and histories and the multiple practices that the presentation of the self brings with itself as a way to push back on the easy diagnosis of the self as merely a symptom of narcissist obsessions devoid of meaning. Without triumphalism their essays attempt to offer an analytical and methodological framework to go beyond the predictable split between a wishful assessment of empowerment (strongly characterized along gender lines) and a nihilistic and despairing reading. Peraica engages myths tied to visibility–Orpheus and Perseus—and contemporary techniques and technologies of selfies as participating in what remains behind the subject on the screen. Della Ratta, building on field work and the auto-ethnography methodologies employed within an undergraduate critical media studies classroom, analyzes networked emotions and identities as machine-generated instances of our present day networked emotional capitalism.

The third section deals with mask, visibility, and anonymity, in an effort to preserve the intangibility of the online subjectivity, avoiding the traps of recognition as a governmentality tool. Authors in this section explore the escape potential of mask and anonymity to avoid the stage of visibility, perceived as a prison. The authors work on different exodus strategies for hiding identity as a political statement of independence from the subjectivity cage, and the individuality institution that constrains and divides collectivities and commons of practices. Subjects without name and faces manifest an effort of subtraction from the identification and a statement against authenticity and the ideology of identity.

Coleman discusses the political role of a plural collective name group as Anonymous. She affirms that, though being anonymous cannot count as guaranteeing good faith, it is not always a sign of bad faith. Whether anonymity can work in the name of collectivity as a moral subject or it is bound to act abusively without being kept, it is a matter which is regulated by the context. Transparency is not a panacea for misinformation. Anonymity is a tool that can be used for weak and poor people to exercise a pressure on power. This is a possibility which is not guaranteed, but it stands as an opportunity to avoid the need for recognition and to practice "humility, truth-telling and solidarity."

The works of Micali and Deseriis deal with resistance possibilities of the collective subject of anonymous within the different nuances of the hiding face/masking strategy. According to Deseriis the evolution of the digital surveillance interface implies the loss of control over technological interactions from the human perception. In front of a one-way mirrors

that is built to record and exploit the digital traces left unprotected by human activities online, there are various strategies that can help the resistance against the data control over our experience and habits: "exposure, obfuscation and concatenation." The last solution offers the possibility of adopting a condividual interface that shows the impossibility of a clear distinction between the event and the medium that is supposed to filter, understand and shape it. This response to surveillance interface offers an escape strategy without confronting the strength of platforms. In the meanwhile, the approach avoids the complete subaltern approach to the control power of the surveillance interface.

Micali's work focuses again on the face/mask solution adopted by the Anonymous resistance, by interpreting it using the intensive category of affect borrowed by Guattari study of psychogenesis. The embodiment of Anonymous through an institutionalized facialization process can act as a resistance against "ontological homogeneity" that is hypothesized when profiling is in action. The facial machine process prevents us to go back to the past time without the individualization process. However, the aesthetics of Anonymous' mask challenges the facial machine and its configuration, via a collective identification process capable of activating a force of resistance, projected in the future.

In this section thus the dialectic about visibility and concealing is used as a double bind, or as an inspiring paradox in terms of resistance against the power of control, exploitation, and surveillance. Both strategies visibility and mask adoption can be subversive in their characters, depending on the context of the online presence and on the shape taken by resistance action according to circumstances.

De Zeeuw aims at understanding differences between face and mask in social network and in particular he concentrates his attention on two opposite tropes and collective names: Guy Fawkes mask and the naked obese man that symbolizes the impersonal identity of 4Chan. According to this contribution the symbolic personification of the characters represents "an existence without identity," something which is irreducible to the personal and yet belongs to everybody, the possibility of commonality, while remaining impersonal.

This collective identity, which was present both at the origin of the web and in the present mask culture, is in contrast with the social network culture of face and name recognition and identification. The collective names and symbols preserve the possibility of the common belonging to humankind; however, their culture is threatened by the imposition of

identification whose spread is the consequence of the bow toward the narcissism altar.

Boccia Artieri's paper deals with the complexity of the online self with respect to visibility. The core of the paper is the analysis of the selfie protest phenomenon as a "strategy to handle the tension between the public and private sphere over political and civic issues producing ephemeral public spheres." The agency of the private sphere for a public cause creates a contradiction, but also a link between private and public presence of the online self that allows a confluence of political potential that can exploit creative expression as well as the public role of online identity.

The final paper of the section by Jodi Dean theorizes about the emerging of the "secondary visuality" as a feature of communicative capitalism. Building on the theories of Walter Ong and Walter Benjamin, she interprets the repetition of images and their circulation as a flow, that mixes together images and writing. This flow creates a new common based on the circulation of faces that do not contribute to individualism as it is usually interpreted. The continuous, indistinguishable circulation of images and, in particular, of faces images, produces new opportunities for the political setting of the collective requests. Out of the constant montage of the face reproductions for repetition and distribution, the collectivity can find an interstice to manifest itself. Capitalism succeeded in privatizing social interactions, using it as an exploitable resource, and brand are the commercial version of this repetition. However, it is possible that "Political tactics adequate to this setting will find ways to seize and deploy the common in the service of a divisive egalitarian politics."

In between the various sections we have included a series of Entr'actes, designed as interludes and evoking the temporal and spatial dislocations of René Clair's 1924 short film. Thus, the entr'actes break from the discursive structure of meaning of the essays contained in the three sections while maintaining a deep connection with the themes and topics the latter develop. The entr'actes feature visuals and short texts from those artists who attended the "Fear and Loathing of the Online Self" conference in Rome. This collection of material works as a sort of visual punctuation to the essays, transposing the tropes analytically explored and deconstructed in the sections into living objects of art, live performances, and online installations.

Entr'acte I features Shu Lea Cheang's "I buy myself an avatar selfie." Building on her previous work "3x3x6," a mixed-media installation that

represented Taiwan at the Venice Biennale in 2019, the artist questions the structure of digital surveillance technologies implemented by contemporary algorithmic cultures to discipline the body. Using her signature style she hacks into the algorithm of gender and sexuality in the digital age, disrupting these surveillance practices and injecting into the latter her personal queer-punk-sci-fi touch.

Entr'acte II displays the work of Antonia Hernandez and Marguerite Kalhor.

Chilean artist and researcher Antonia Hernandez presents a selection from her doctoral work "Maintenance Pornography," an art-based research project exploring social production and reproduction on sexcam platforms. By staging micro-performances inside a dollhouse using her fingers and screencasting these shows live on Chaturbate, Hernandez highlights the "domestic" side of online sex work and shows the role of invisible maintenance practices, practices of preservation and care, in the generation of monetary value for the performer and, consequently, for platform capitalism overall.

Californian new media artist Marguerite Kalhor playfully explores the "selfie" tropes she finds online and experiments with them to recombine meanings using semantic guerilla practices. Her work defies the concept of "now," of deceptive "real" evidence of presentness and authenticity, myths that have imbued contemporary practices of construction of the online self, from taking selfies to livestreaming to building online profiles. Using irony and playfulness, Kalhor creates dada visuals experimenting with data and algorithmic cultures.

Entr'acte III presents art installations from Simon Boas and Kris Blackmore, and Francisco Gonzalez Rosas.

Boas and Blackmore's "Yes in disguise" investigates the intersection of technology, culture, and aesthetics. The installation explores the notion of sexual consent with heterosexual male users of the popular dating website OKCupid. Featuring printed trading cards from data that have been extracted from the site's profiles, "Yes in disguise" is an exercise in social hacking that unveils illusions of privacy on social media and reflects on ways in which misogyny, sexual violence, and abuse are perpetrated, whether indirectly or explicitly, through the building of one's online self.

"Automated Queer Desire" by Francisco Gonzalez Rosas is a visual journey exploring queer sexuality and the making of queer bodies. Gonzalez Rosas reflects on the visuality of the queer body as constructed

by dating apps, and on the ways in which the latter becomes hyper-communicated, outsourced to technological devices, its sense of freedom and uniqueness being carefully planned and orchestrated with an emphasis on hedonism, desire, and enjoyment that ultimately serve platform capitalism.

Notes

1. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Profile Books, 2019, p. 36.
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4. Edward Snowden, *Permanent Record*, Macmillan, London, 2019, pp. 66–67.
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11. https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2019/06/29/8chan/content.html.
12. Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*, Ugly Duckling Press, Brooklyn, 2018, p. 90.
13. "How to Be More Photogenic: Selfie Queens Share Their Secrets 1. Lighting is key. 2. Know your angles. 3. Crop when necessary. 4. Use an app. 5. Find your good side. 6. Show off your signature face. 7. When all else fails, have an expert take the picture." https://www.byrdie.com/how-to-be-more-photogenic.
14. Boyer, p. 96.
15. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2017, p. 3.
16. Mbembe, p. 4.
17. Mbembe, p. 5.
18. http://reflektor-m.de/kuenstler/text/the-neighbor-as-a-metaphysical-constant-of-virtuality-with-luce-delire.

Entr’acte 1

I Buy Myself an Avatar Selfie

Shu Lea Cheang

Credit at book end (Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4).

S. L. Cheang (✉)
London, UK

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65497-9_2

Fig. 1 Avatar selfie—Shu Lea Cheang (2019), 3D rendered by Guan-ming Lin

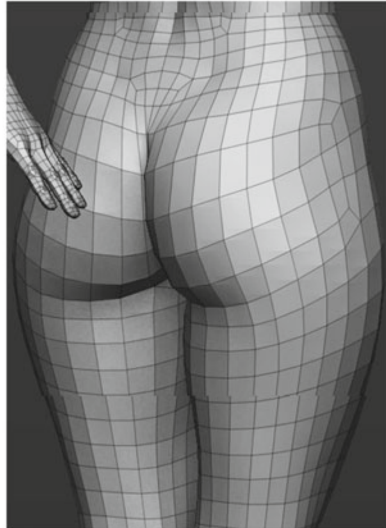

Fig. 2 I buy myself an avatar selfie on the internet

I FUCK UP MY FACE TRACKING

Fig. 3 I fuck up my face tracking

Fig. 4 Draw face codes for Shu Lea Cheang's 3 × 3 × 6 (2019), coded by Jason Lee

The Politics of Algorithimic Representation

Co-relating the Online Self

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

I would like to wager the following: to understand fear, loathing, and the online self, we need to apprehend algorithmic schemes of friendship and neighborliness, correlation, and authenticity. That is, if there seemed to be significant and largely unforeseen spikes post-2016 in hatred and anger, it is due to how people are divided in name of love. These practices, however, are not new: they are legacies of twentieth-century eugenics and segregation. Thus, to grasp the current situation, we need to understand the history and impact of correlation and homophily—the drivers behind Big Data hype.

Correlation, Correlation, Correlation

The twenty-first century was supposed to be the century of "Big Data." *The Economist* proclaimed data the "new oil," the world's most valuable resource[1]; IBM promised that big data analytics would offer "insights without limits."[2] *Fox News* declared that "'Big Data' will blow your mind

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and change the 21st century."[3] *Bloomberg*, *Oracle*, and numerous other organizations proclaimed that Big Data would "disrupt" everything.[4],[5]

Correlation grounded Big Data's revolutionary potential. As *Wired* editor Chris Anderson infamously declared, Big Data—in particular, *Google's* ability to predict future trends such as flu epidemics—proved that "correlation supersedes causation, and science can advance even without coherent models, unified theories, or really any mechanistic explanation at all."[6] Less controversially, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier, in their popular book *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work and Think*, asserted that, by replacing causality with "simple correlations," Big Data "challenges our most basic understanding of how to make decisions and comprehend reality." It substituted the "why" with the "what" and by doing so transformed knowledge from an understanding the past to the ability to predict the future.[7]

Not surprisingly, Big Data was also and immediately dismissed as hype: the latest in a long line of techno-utopic (and dystopic) fads. Google Flu Trends, for example, was shown to be wildly inaccurate: it predicted double the number of actual cases.[8] Undoubtedly, it is important to understand the limits of data analytics; at the same time, though, simply dismissing data analytics as hype and celebrating "missed" predictions as evidence of our unpredictability are hardly emancipatory. The gap between prediction and actuality should not foster snide comfort, given that random recommendations are often deliberately seeded in order to provoke spontaneous behavior. Further, "Big Data" posed and still poses fascinating computational problems (how does one analyze data that one can read in once, if at all?), and the plethora of correlations it traces raises fundamental questions about causality: if almost anything can be shown to be real (if almost any correlation can be discovered), how do we know what matters, that is, what is true? The "pre-Big Data" example of the "Super Bowl predictor" nicely encapsulates this dilemma, for one of the best predictors of the US stock market is the result of the Super Bowl: if an NFC team wins, it will likely be a bull market; if an AFC team wins, it will be a bear market.[9] Further, calling technology hype is hardly profound. The Valley lives and dies by the demo.[10] Hype is part of technology, and not-yet-existing technologies, rather than existing ones, are the subjects of praise and condemnation. To understand the impact of the "data deluge" therefore, we need to move beyond celebration and

critique toward comprehending the force of its promise. So how do data analytics reveal the future?

To answer this question, consider Michal Kosinski and colleague's influential 2013 PNAS article "Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behavior."[11] This article reportedly revealed how easy it is to predict personal user latent attributes such as "sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender" based on publicly available Facebook likes.[12] As the list above makes clear, they estimated a person's personality, as well as their physical traits. They could so because over 58,000 users filled out their Facebook personality questionnaire, which gave Kosinski access to their answers and their profiles.[13]

To produce these estimates, Kosinski et al. first came up with intrusive traits such as "political views," "parents stayed together until the individual was 21," "ethnic background," and "intelligence," which they "measured" using various methods: from intelligence tests to visual examination of profiles. They then created a vast but sparse user-like matrix comprised of all likes associated with each user. Next, they decomposed this matrix using singular value decomposition to determine the hundred most significant components (most basically, SVD reduces a matrix of data points into a series of vectors, ranked by how much they explain the original data set). They then created linear regression models to predict the numeric attributes, such as personality and age, and logistic regression models to predict dichotomous values, such as male vs. female; or Christian vs. Muslim (Figs. 1 and 2) using these most significant components.

The accuracy of these models varied greatly, with the most accurate being for Caucasian versus African American and male versus female, and the least accurate being satisfaction with life, followed by conscientiousness (C), emotional stability (N), and agreeableness (A). Finally, they produced tables of the most predictive likes—that is, those with the highest weighted average or the most extreme frequencies of classes—for certain traits (Fig. 3).

Based on this, they claimed that by knowing as few as one like, one could determine an undisclosed personal trait of any given user. For example, given how highly correlated WuTang Clan was for male heterosexuality, liking this band would give away one's sexuality; similarly, liking Sephora would disclose one's low IQ score. Although this article justifies

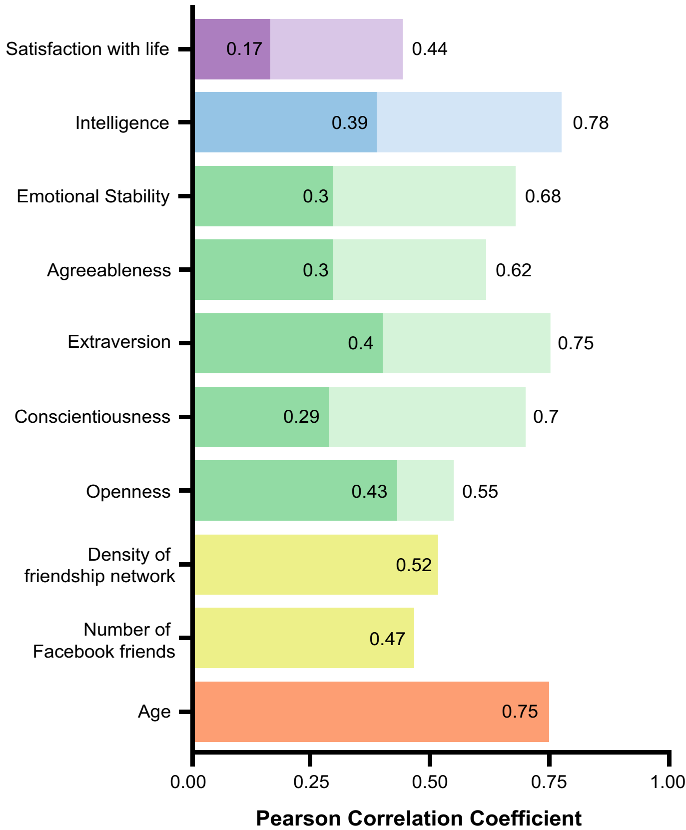

Fig. 1 Prediction accuracy for linear regression models. Redrawn from Michal Kosinski, David Stillwell, and Thore Graepel, "Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 110, no. 15 (2013): 5804

its research in terms of "warning" users of possible privacy violation, it clearly shows how to estimate "latent" categories in order to create clusters of users, which can include individuals not tracked in an initial survey. Kosinski stresses that the most significant likes for any given category do not simply reflect that category: "Britney Spears" is a more popular and revealing like for "male homosexuality" than "Being Gay." Through your network neighbors—users deemed to be like you because they like

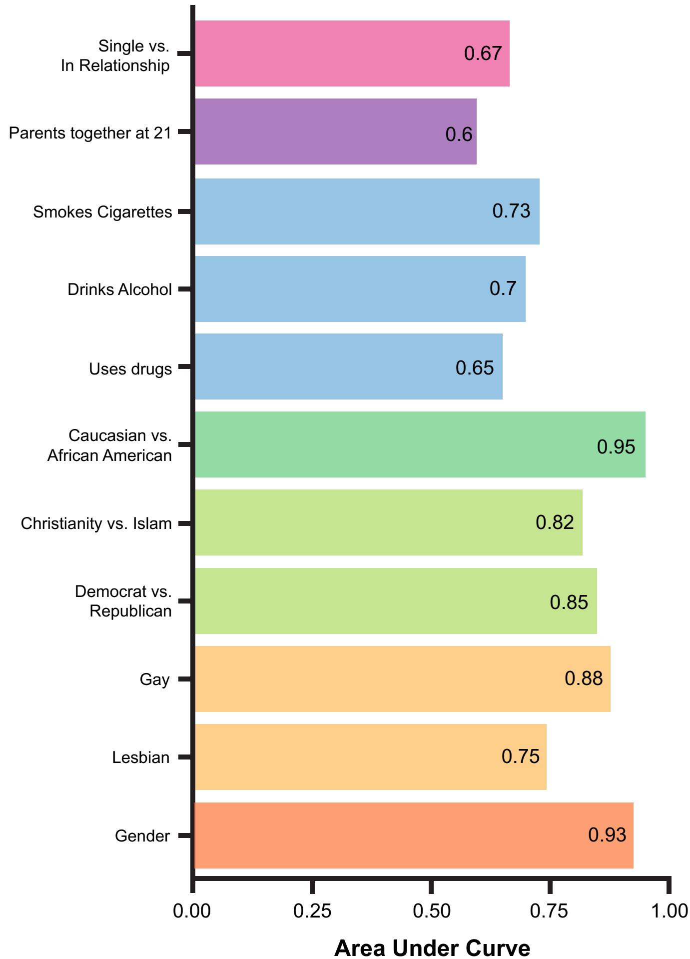

Fig. 2 Prediction accuracy for dichotomous logistic regression models. redrawn from Kosinski, Stillwell, and Graepel, "Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable," 5803

Trait		Selected most predicted Likes		
IQ	*High*	The Godafather	Jason Aldean	*Low*
		Mozart	Tyler Perry	
		Thunderstorms	Sephora	
		The Colbert Report	Chiq	
		Morgan Freeman's Voice	Bret Michaels	
		The Daily Show	Clark Griswold	
		Lord of the Rings	Bebe	
		To Kill a Mockingbird	I Love Being a Mom	
		Science	Harley Davidson	
		Curly Fries	Lady Antebellum	
Sexual Orientation	*Homosexual Males*	No H8 Campaign	X Games	*Heterosexual Males*
		Kathy Griffin	Nike Basketball	
		Kurt Hummel Glee	Bungie	
		Human Rights Campaign	WWE	
		Mac Cosmetics	Sportsnation	
		Adam Lambert	Wu-Tang Clan	
		Ellen DeGeneres	Foot Locker	
		Juicy Couture	Shaq	
		Sue Sylvester Glee	Bruce Lee	
		Wicked The Musical	Being Confused After Waking Up From Naps	
	Homosexual Females	Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys	Lipton Brisk	*Heterosexual Females*
		Rupauls Drag Race	Yahoo	
		No H8 Campaign	Adidas Originals	
		Gay Marriage	Foot Locker	
		Human Rights Campaign	WWE	
		The L Word	Inbox 1 Makes Me Nervous	
		Sometimes I Just Lay In Bed And Think About Life	Thinking Of Something And Laughing Alone	
		Not Being Pregnant	I Just Realized Immature Spells I'm Mature	
		Gay Marriage	Did You Get A Haircut No It Grew Shorter	
		Tegan And Sara	Nike Women	

Fig. 3 Postpredictive likes for dichotomous categories, redrawn from Kosinski, Stillwell, and Graepel, "Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable," Table S-1

what you like and hate what you hate—you are captured even when you are silent. Through your agitated neighbors, you become predictable and linear.

These predictions are wedded at every level to the past. They are trained on past data; the past determines both the coefficients of the regression models and the principal components; and their predictions are verified as correct if they predict the past, not the future, correctly, for they are cross-validated using past data that is hidden during the training period. Kosinski and colleagues make this more clear in their follow up, the 2015 PNAS article, "Computer-based personality judgments are more

accurate than those made by humans."[14] For this study, they used 90% of their data as a training set to build a linear regression model for predicting personality type, and then tested it against the remaining 10% (Fig. 4). This form of verification means that if the past is racist and sexist, these models will only be verified as correct if they make sexist and racist predictions, especially if they rely on problematic measures such as standard IQ tests. Tellingly, low IQ is highly correlated with liking "I Love Being a Mom."

What this analysis reveals is that the online self, however isolated or however offline, is never alone. As I've argued in *Updating to Remain the Same*, new media are N(YOU) media; new media are a function of YOU. New media relentlessly emphasize you: Youtube.com; What's on your mind?; You are the Person of the Year. The medium is no longer the mass, but YOU. In English, YOU is a particularly shifty shifter. YOU is both singular and plural; in its plural mode, however, it still targets individuals as individuals. In terms of the Kosinski articles, individuals are no longer silent not only because their data is captured by researchers,

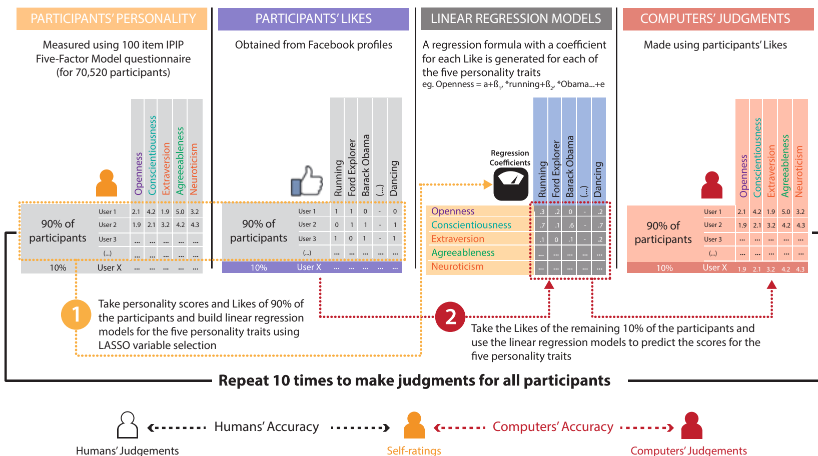

Fig. 4 Testing the training model using past data, redrawn from Wu Youyou, Michal Kosinski, and David Stillwell, "Computer-BasedbPersonality Judgments Are More Accurate Than Those Made by Humans," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 112, no. 4 (2015): 1037

but also because their so-called friends and network neighbors serve as direct and indirect leaks. N(YOU) media are fundamentally leaky.

The online self is never singular but always singular plural because in these algorithms similarity and correlation coincide. Causality has not been overtaken by correlation but expanded across time and space because causality has traditionally been correlation, correlation, correlation. That is, causality, which David Hume has argued stems from habit, is no longer tied to an individual's habit, but rather a neighborhood's.

Habit is key to determining probabilities, for habits render past contingent repetitions into anticipatable connections. Given David Hume's groundbreaking work on anticipation and repetition, it is no surprise that Hume is the popular Big Data philosophical reference, appearing in articles in *Wired Magazine* and in PowerPoint presentations made by those advising the US Intelligence Community.[15,16] Although this reference is often made glibly, it highlights the importance of habits to understanding how causality, correlation, and anticipation work in the era of the inexperienceable experience. Gilles Deleuze, reading Hume in *Experience and Subjectivity* (a text that would have a profound affect on his later work), outlines the linkage of experience and habit in Hume's theory of causality as follows: causality, Deleuze explains, does not proceed on the basis of certainty (it is not based on intuition or demonstration), but rather on the basis of probabilities.[17] This does not mean that causality is derived from probability, but rather that causality forms gradually and is the result of habit, which presupposes experience, even as it does not coincide with it. According to Hume, "experience is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. Habit is *another principle*, which determines me to expect the same for the future" (emphasis in original). Experience presents cases of constant conjunction to the inspecting mind, but "repetition by itself does not constitute progression."[18] Habit allows the mind to transcend experience: to reason about experience "as it transforms belief into a possible act of understanding."[19] Causality is thus both "the union of similar objects and also a mental inference from one object to another."[20]

Crucially, though, habit and experience are not—and do not—always have to be unified. Habit, for Hume, poses the possibility of falsifying experience, for it "can feign or invoke a false experience, and bring about belief through 'a repetition' which 'is not deriv'd from experience.'"[21] These beliefs, however inevitable, are, Hume stresses and Deleuze underscores, illegitimate: they "form the set of general, extensive, and excessive

rules that … [are called] *nonphilosphical probability*" (emphasis in original).[22] To correct these beliefs, the understanding intervenes through a corrective principle that restrains belief to the limits of past experience—to the "rules of *philosophical probability* or the calculus of probabilities" (emphasis in original) so, although "the characteristic of belief, inference, and reasoning is to transcend experience and to transfer the past to the future; … it is necessary that the object of belief be determined in accordance with a past experience."[23] According to Hume: "[W]hen we transfer the past to the future, the known to the unknown, every past experiment has the same weight, and … 'tis only a superior number of them which can throw the balance on any side."[24] In the world of "Big Data," philosophical probability divines causal relations not between things that repeat successively, but rather across time and space. It expands beyond an individual's experience to draw from experiences of people "like you." Through data analytics, your history becomes YOUR history—the history of your so-called neighborhood.

Birds of a Feather Get Tracked Together

At the heart of social media networks is the principle of homophily: the axiom that "similarity breeds connection."[25] Homophily structures networks by creating clusters; by doing so, it also makes networks searchable.[26,27] Homophily grounds network growth and dynamics, by fostering and predicting the likelihood of ties. Homophily—now a "commonsense" concept that slips between effect and cause—assumes and creates segregation; it presumes consensus and similarity within local clusters, therefore making segregation a default characteristic of network neighborhoods. In valorizing "voluntary" actions, even as it troubles simple notions of "peer influence" and contagion, it erases historical contingencies, institutional discrimination, and economic realities.[28,29] At its worst, it serves as an alibi for the inequality it maps, while also obviating politics: homophily (often allegedly of those discriminated against)—not racism, sexism, and inequality—becomes the source of inequality so that injustice becomes "natural" or "ecological." Homophily turns hate into love and transforms individuals into "neighbors" who naturally want to live together, which assumes that neighborhoods should be filled with segregated. If we thus manage to "love our neighbor"—once considered a difficult ethical task—it is because our neighbors are virtually ourselves. Homophily makes anomalous conflicting opinions,

cross-racial relationships, ambivalence, and heterosexuality, among many other phenomena.

According to Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James Cook in their definitive review article on homophily, "the homophily principle structures network ties of every type, including marriage, friendship, work, advice, support, information transfer, exchange, co-membership, and other types of relationship."[30] As a result, "people's personal networks are homogeneous with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics." Rather than framing homophily as historically contingent, they understand it as fundamental and timeless: indeed, they start their review with quotations from Aristotle and Plato about similarity determining friendship and love (which they admit in a footnote may be misleading, since Aristotle and Plato also claimed that opposites attract). Homophily, according to McPherson et al., is the result of and factor in "human ecology."[31]

Homophily sits at the fold between network structure and individual agency. As McPherson et al. relay the "remarkably robust" patterns of homophily across numerous and diverse studies, they also break down homophily into two types: baseline homophily ("homophily effects that are created by the demography of the potential tie pool") and inbreeding homophily ("homophily measured as explicitly over and above the opportunity set").[32] In their review, the authors note that race and ethnicity are clearly the "biggest divide in social networks today in the United States," due both to baseline and inbreeding homophily."[33] They list the following causes of homophily: geography ("the most basic source of homophily is space"); family ties; organizational foci, occupational, family, and informal roles; cognitive processes; and selective tie dissolutions.[34] Remarkably missing are: personal or institutional racism and discrimination, and history. In the world of networks, love, not hate, drives segregation, even though "proof" if this love is repulsion of others.

Given that the very notion of homophily emerges from studies of segregation, the "discovery" of race as a divisive factor is hardly surprising. Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton coined the term homophily in an 1954 text that analyzed friendship patterns within two housing projects: "Craftown, a project of some seven hundred families in New Jersey, and Hilltown, a bi-racial, low-rent project of about eight hundred families in western Pennsylvania."[35] They studied these housing projects in the late 40s and interviewed almost every resident using a lengthy questionnaire. Crucially, they did not assume homophily as a grounding

principle, nor did they find homophily to be "naturally" present; rather they asked: "what are the dynamic processes through which the similarity or opposition of values shape the formation, maintenance, and disruption of close friendships?".[36] In addition to "homophily," they coined the term "heterophily," and this pair was inspired by Branislow Malinowski's ethnographic analysis of the "savage Trobianders whose native idiom at least distinguishes friendships within one's in-group from friendships outside this social circle" and by the work of Karl Pearson and Havelock Ellis on homogamy and heterogamy.[37]

Although Lazarsfeld and Merton coined both homophily and heterophily, in "Friendship as Social Process" they focused exclusively on measuring and explaining homophily within white residents of Hilltown. To do so, they focus on answers to the following two questions: "Q25. Do you think colored and white people should live together in housing projects?" and "Q26: On the whole, do you think that colored and white residents in the Village get along pretty well, or not so well?" Based on the answers, they divided the white residents into three camps: liberals, who "believe that 'colored' and white people should live together in housing projects and who support this belief by saying that the two racial groups 'get along pretty well' in Hilltown"; illiberals, who "maintain that the races should be residentially segregated and who justify this view by claiming that, in Hilltown, where the two races do live in the same project, they fail to get along"; and ambivalents, who "believe that the races should not be allowed to live in the same project, even though it must be admitted that they have managed to get along in Hilltown."[38] They ignored the responses of black residents: they removed them from the analysis of value homophily because there were "too few illiberal or ambivalent Negroes with friends in Hilltown." Thus, at the heart of value-homophily lies an initial racial segregation, an implicit assumption that values do not cross-racial borders, or if they do, that this crossing is less significant than value consensus or conflict within a race. Based on this exclusion, they claimed that: liberals over-select other liberals by 43%; illiberals over-select other illiberals by 30%; liberals under-select illiberals as close friends by 53%; illiberals under-select liberals by 39%; and ambivalents do not over-select or under-select.[39] Given the small numbers, the over-selection of illiberals for other illiberals was not, by their own admission, statistically significant. In these analyses, not only did the responses by black residents and the possibilities of cross-racial value solidarity disappear, so did the white ambivalents, which comprised the largest category

of white residents. The ambivalents, it was assumed, must either become liberal or illiberal in order to maintain "equilibrium" or comfort.

Within network science today, this history has been forgotten and homophily has moved problem to solution. Homophily is no longer something to be accounted for, but rather something that "naturally" accounts for and justifies persistence of inequality within facially equal systems. It has become axiomatic, that is, common sense, thus limiting the scope and possibility of network science. As David Easley and Jon Kleinberg—two of the most insightful and important scholars working in the field—explain: "one of the most basic notions governing the structure of social networks is *homophily*—the principle that we tend to be similar to our friends." To make this point, they point to the distribution of "our" friends. "Typically," they write,

> your friends don't look like a random sample of the underlying population. Viewed collectively, your friends are generally similar to you along racial and ethnic dimensions: they are similar in age; and they are also similar in characteristics that are more or less mutable, including the places they live, their occupations, their interests, beliefs, and opinions. Clearly most of us have specific friendships that cross all these boundaries; but in aggregate, the pervasive fact is that links in a social network tend to connect people who are similar to one another.[40]

Homophily is a "pervasive fact" that governs the structure of networks. As a form of natural governance—based on presumptions about "comfort"—it grounds network models, which not surprisingly also "discover" segregation. For instance, Lenore Newman and Ann Dale state: "We feel more comfortable with those like ourselves, even in virtual communities."[41] Although many authors such as Easley and Kleinberg insist that homophily "is often not an end point in itself but rather the starting point for deeper questions—questions that address why the homophily is present, how its underlying mechanisms will affect the further evolution of the network, and how these mechanisms interact with possible outside attempts to influence the behavior of people in the network,"[42] homophily as a starting point cooks the ending point it discovers.

Segregation is what is "recovered" and justified if homophily is assumed. Easley and Kleinberg state quite simply that "one of the most readily perceived effects of homophily is the formation of ethnically and racially homogeneous neighborhoods in cities."[43] To explain this, they

turn to the "Schelling model" of segregation, a simulation that maps the movement of "two distinct types of agents" in a grid. The grounding constraint is the desire of each agent "to have at least some other agents of its own as type of neighbors."[44] Showing results for this simulation, they note that spatial segregation happens even when no individual agent seeks it: the example for $t = 3$ (therefore, each agent would be happy as a minority) yields overwhelmingly segregated results. In response, they write:

> Segregation does not happen because it has been subtly built into the model: agents are willing to be in the minority, and they could all be satisfied if only we were able to carefully arrange them in an integrated pattern. The problem is that, from a random start, it is very hard for the collection of agents to find such integrated patterns. …
>
> In the long run, the process tends to cause segregated regions to grow at the expense of more integrated ones. The overall effect is one in which the local preferences of individual agents have produced a global pattern that none of them necessarily intended.
>
> This point is ultimate at the heart of the model: although segregation in real life is amplified by a genuine desire within some fraction of the population to belong to large clusters of similar people—either to avoid people who belong to other groups, or to acquire a critical mass of members from one's own group—such factors are not necessary for segregation to occur. The underpinnings of segregation are already present in a system where individuals simply want to avoid being in too extreme a minority in their own local area.[45]

I cite this at length because this interpretation reveals the dangers of homophily. The long history and legacy of race-based slavery within the United States is erased, as well as the importance of desegregation to the civil rights movement. There are no random initial conditions. The "initial conditions" found within US neighborhoods and the very grounding presumption that agents have a preference regarding the number of "alike" neighbors are problematic. The desire not to be in a minority—and to move if one is—maps most accurately the situations of white flight, a response to desegregation. If taken as an explanation for gentrification, it portrays the movement of minorities to more affordable and less desirable areas as voluntary, rather than as the result of rising rents and taxes. Further, it completely erases—while at the same time presuming—the desire of some to move into neighborhoods into which on is not

a majority. If this model finds that institutions are not to blame for segregation, it is because institutional actions are rendered invisible in it.

Thomas C. Schelling's original publication makes this deliberate erasure of institutions and economics, as well as the engagement with white flight (or "neighborhood tipping"), clear. His now classic "Dynamic Models of Segregation" was published in 1971, during the heart of the civil rights movement and at the beginning of forced school desegregation.[46,47] Schelling, in his paper, acknowledged that he was deliberately excluding two main processes of segregation: organized action (it thus does not even mention the history of slavery and legally enforced segregation) and economic segregation, even though "economic segregation might statistically explain some initial degree of segregation."[48] Economic assumptions, however, were embedded at all levels in his model. Deliberate analogies to both economics and evolution grounded his analysis of the "surprising results" of unorganized individual behavior.[49] He used economic language lay explain what he openly terms "discriminatory behavior."[50] At the heart of his model lies immutable difference: "I assume:"

> a population exhaustively divided into two groups; every- one's membership is permanent and recognizable. Everybody is assumed to care about the color of the people he lives among and able to observe the number of blacks and whites that occupy apiece of territory. Everybody has a particular location at any moment; and everybody is capable of moving if he is dissatisfied with the color mixture where he is. The numbers of blacks and whites, their color preferences, and the sizes of 'neighborhoods' will be manipulated.[51]

These assumptions were and are troubling and loaded. They cover over the history of redlining and other government-sanctioned programs that made it almost impossible for black citizens to buy homes, while helping white citizens buy to do so.[52] They also render invisible the effects of solutions to "fix" the fluidity of racial identity within the United States, such as the "one drop rule," which grounded segregation and effectively made black and white identity *not* about visible differences. As well, homophily maps hate as love. How do you show you love the same? By running away when others show up.

We have to remember that this is not correlations' first rodeo. Sir Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, biometric eugenicists, first "discovered"

correlation at the turn of the twentieth century in their attempts to determine heredity. Correlation, Pearson argued, made biometric eugenicists "buccaneers" on the edge of plunder and discovery; it expanded knowledge beyond causality and beyond the natural sciences toward the "field of human conduct." Pearson's hyperbolic rhetoric foreshadows twenty-first-century Big Data hype. The methods used by Kosinski and *Cambridge Analytica*—correlation, linear and logistical regression, and factor analysis—stem from twentieth-century eugenics. OCEAN is the product of eugenicists and discredited researchers, such as Sir Francis Galton, Charles Spearman, Hans Eynsenck, and Raymond Cattell, who developed and used factor analysis, based initially on principal component analysis (PCA) and correlation, to divide the human races and genders according to intelligence, among other traits.[53,54] The "O" in OCEAN, openness, was initially labeled "intelligence."[55] According to Geert Hofstede and Robert McCrae, "Five- Factor Theory" (FFT), developed as a reaction against subjectivity-based psychology, "is unique in asserting that traits have only biological bases."[56] By asserting that these factors were "universal," they could then claim that they could linearly link the past and future together.

To be clear, by drawing out the similarities between 20th biometric eugenics and current uses of correlation, I am not saying that any and all use of statistical methods developed by eugenicists are inherently eugenicist. What I am saying is that this eugenicist history matters because correlation works—when it does—by making the past and future coincide. Eugenicists reconstructed the past in order to determine/design a future that could not be radically different from their reconstructions because in their systems, learning or nurture—differences acquired within a lifetime—were "noise." By "clarifying" fuzzy boundaries and transmissions, predictions based on correlations make true disruption impossible, which is perhaps why they are so disruptive. So what to do? How can we learn from past mistakes—rather than automatically embed them in the future?

Co-relation Rather Than Correlation:

To create a different world, we need to question default assumptions about homophily. As Sara Ahmed has argued in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "love of the same" is never innocent: white supremacist love, for instance, is based on a hatred of others.[57] The movement away

from others, which grounds models of homophily, reveals the extent to which hatred precedes homophily. The hatred that networks foster, then, should surprise no one. Hatred, Ahmed stresses, organizes bodies. It is an emotional "investment" that makes certain bodies responsible for pain or injury. It organizes by bringing things and bodies together—by linking certain figures together so they become a common threat, an X to "our" O. Hate transforms the particular into the general: it transforms individuals into types so they become a common threat (I hate you because you are Y). It also transforms Is into wes who are threatened by this other. Homophily is never innocent: the very construction of Xs and Os, who define their discomfort in relation to the presence of others, reveals hatred, not love. Hatred is what makes possible strong bonds that define a core against a periphery. Thus, it is not only that network science seemingly makes the modeling of conflict impossible, it does so while also hiding conflict as friendship.

What this makes clear is the following: rather than mutual ignorance, apathy, or revulsion, what is needed is engagement, discussion, and yes, even conflict, in order to imagine and perform a different future. The proliferation of echo chambers and the erasure of politics is not inevitable—we can make them self-canceling prophecies. Although this will entail more than different network algorithms, these algorithms are a good place to start. What if we took up Joanne Sison and Warren Sack's challenge to build democratic search engines, that is, search engines that gave users the most diverse rather than the most popular results)? How would this challenge assumptions about the "power law" (rich get richer; poor get poorer), which these algorithms foster, as well as discover? What would happen if ties did not represent friendship but rather conflict? What other world would emerge if clusters represented difference rather than similarities? What other ways would be revealed of navigating the world and of making recommendations?

Vi Hart and Nicky Case, in their remarkable remodeling of Schelling—The Parable of the Polygons (2017)[58]—makes explicit the relationship between initial conditions and history. Further, their model takes the desire for desegregation, rather than segregation, as the default. The lessons learned are thus:

1. Small individual bias → Large collective bias. When someone says a culture is shapist, they're not saying the individuals in it are shapist. They're not attacking you personally.

2. The past haunts the present. Your bedroom floor doesn't stop being dirty just coz you stopped dropping food all over the carpet. Creating equality is like staying clean: it takes work. And it's always a work in progress.
3. Demand diversity near you. If small biases created the mess we're in, small antibiases might fix it. Look around you. Your friends, your colleagues, that conference you're attending. If you're all triangles, you're missing out on some amazing squares in your life—that's unfair to everyone. Reach out, beyond your immediate neighbors.[59]

To move from correlation to co-relation, we need to occupy and rethink the results of these algorithmic recommendations. For example, what would it mean to take seriously the "WuTang Clan" as an indicator of male hetrosexuality? Given their embrace of Hong Kong Martial Arts films, Brooklyn style rap, and Jacques Cousteau, how might they be used to explode this seemingly enclosed category? Further, what if we treated these predictive programs like global climate change models? These models reveal the most probable future not in order to put that future in place, but rather to incite us to change that future—to act differently so the world unfolds differently. So how might we use the tools of probability to create and put in place the wonderfully improbable?

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Notes

1. *The Economist* (2017).
2. IBM (2019).
3. Fox News (2012).
4. Falconer (n.d.).
5. Bloomberg (2018).
6. Anderson (2008).
7. Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2014).
8. Lazer et al. (2014, 343).
9. Silver (2012, 185).
10. Chun (2016).
11. Kosinski et al. (2013, 5802).

12. Kosinski et al. (2013, 5802).
13. Not surprisingly, Kosinski has been linked to *Cambridge Analytica*. Grassegger and Krogerus (2017).
14. Wu et al. (2015, 1036).
15. Lehrer (2011).
16. Mark (2013).
17. Deleuze (2001, 65).
18. Deleuze (2001, 65).
19. Deleuze (2001, 67).
20. Deleuze (2001, 68).
21. Deleuze (2001, 69).
22. Deleuze (2001, 69).
23. Deleuze (2001, 69).
24. Deleuze (2001, 71).
25. McPherson et al. (2001, 415).
26. Marsden and Freidkin (1993, 127–151).
27. Jackson (2008).
28. Kandel (1978, 427–436).
29. Aral et al. (2013, 125–153).
30. McPherson et al. (2001, 415).
31. McPherson et al. (2001).
32. McPherson et al. (2001, 419).
33. McPherson et al. (2001, 420).
34. McPherson et al. (2001, 429–435).
35. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954, 21).
36. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954, 28).
37. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954, 23).
38. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954, 26).
39. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954, 27–28).
40. Easley and Kleinberg (2010, 78).
41. Newman and Dale (2007, 79–90).
42. Easley and Kleinberg (2010, 83).
43. Easley and Kleinberg (2010, 96).
44. Easley and Kleinberg (2010, 97).
45. Easley and Kleinberg (2010, 101).
46. Schelling (1971, 143–186).
47. In 1972, the NAACP filed a class action lawsuit against the Boston School Committee—Boston is contiguous with Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is where Harvard is located.
48. Schelling (1971, 145).
49. Schelling writes: "economists are familiar with systems that lead to aggregate results that the individual neither intends nor needs to be aware of, results that sometimes have no recognizable counterpart at the level of

the individual. The creation of money by a commercial banking system is one; the way savings decisions cause depressions or inflations is another. Similarly, biological evolution is responsible for a lot of sorting and separating, but the little creature that mate and reproduce and forage for food would be amazed to know that they were bringing about separation of species, territorial sorting, or the extinction of species" (Schelling 1971, 145). Schelling also uses the term "incentives" to explain segregation: from preferences to avoidance to economic constraints (148).

50. At the start of this article, Schelling explains: "This article is about the kinds of segregation—or separation, or sorting—that can result from discriminatory individual behavior. By 'discriminatory,' I mean reflecting an awareness, conscious or unconscious, of sex or age or religion or color or whatever the basis of segregation is, an awareness that influences decisions on where to live, whom to sit by, what occupation to join or avoid, whom to play with or whom to talk to" (144).
51. Schelling (1971, 149).
52. Rothstein (2017).
53. Goldberg (1993, 26–34).
54. Van Court and Cattell (1984).
55. McCrae and John (1992, 198).
56. Hofstede and McCrae (2004, 74).
57. Ahmed (2014).
58. Hart and Case (n.d.).
59. Hart and Case (n.d.).

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Observations (2017): Immersive Post-Sexual

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi

Remember the movie *Carnage*, by Roman Polanski[1]? It is a claustrophobic story about two couples meeting because they have to talk about very painful matters. They stayed in a room for the whole time there, and one of the two couples is made by a beautiful Kate Winslet, very smart and a bit nervous, and a lawyer (Christoph Waltz), who was rather boring, and always engaged on his phone because he was dealing with his important business. This is not relevant for my discourse. At a certain point, I remember Kate Winslet taking the smartphone of the lawyer, throwing it inside a vase full of water and saying the most intelligent sentence I have ever heard about network studies, that is the major area of interest of my friend Geert Lovink[2]: she said that for him what was distant was

This is the transcript of the talk that Franco 'Bifo' Berardi gave at the *Fear and Loathing of the Online Self* Conference, that took place in May 2017 at the John Cabot University and the University of Rome Tre, in Rome. The editors added a few notes to explicit some of the reference and suggestions, in order to clarify the aim of the text. We wish to thank our research assistant Giulia Villanucci, who made the transcript with professionalism, care and patience.

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always more interesting than what was close. What is far away, what is calling from abroad, what is calling from a distant place is always more interesting than what is happening *here, now*. A very synthetic description of our condition in the age of online communication.

However, what I want to talk about is not the online condition in general and the relation between being here and being in a distant place.[3] What I want to speak about is a double scenario that I adopt to describe a transformation of the media scape happening in the present; a possibility. In order to do that, I want to start from an assessment about the general description of the world in our time, from the point of view of an alternative, a dilemma, and a bifurcation.

What is going to happen now? Are we going toward a global civil war, are we going toward an increasing devastation of the social life, are we going toward an explosion of racism, and of nationalism? Or are we going toward a sort of neuro-totalitarian system, governed, controlled, and dominated by a group of global corporations? Someone says five big corporations,[4] maybe six in total. I do not have an answer, of course, and probably there is no answer to this question, because what we will experience, and what we are already experiencing now is a sort of continuous intertwining between the two perspectives. On one side, the global civil war is going to spread—what is happening nowadays is already an announcement of it—and the lines of the global civil war are changing day by day, but this trend is apparently an unavoidable trend.

In 2016, just a few months before dying, Zbigniew Brzeziński,[5] in an article titled "Toward a Global Realignment," said that we are going toward some decades of increasing aggressiveness and of increasing fight between the Western, white humiliated workers and the population of the colonized world.[6]

Brzezinski's prediction is probably darker than mine, but it is an easy prediction to make these days. At the same time, I also remember that the unavoidable *never* happens, because the unpredictable always changes things. Thus, I'm not pessimist, I see the trend of an increasing and expanding global civil war clearly in front of us. But, at the same time, I see another perspective, which is different and diverging, although at the same time interweaving with the first; and the second trend is the trend toward the creation of a sort of "ultimate automaton": the point of connection of some trends of automation of human cognitive activity, of human perception, of human projection, and of human language.[7] In the intersection between these two trends that characterize clearly the

present age, I wish to say something about what may be the next wave of automation of cognitive activity. I want to imagine something about the emerging tendency toward immersion as the new possible dimension of the automation of cognitive activity.

When I say immersion, I refer to a not so new technological trend that is giving signs of being on the brink of an explosion: immersive technology. It is not new, because I remember when in 1993, I was in Toronto and went to visit a friend, Derrick de Kerckhove, who was the director of the McLuhan program at that time. He told me: "Oh, I have something crazy to show you: take this!" And he put a thing on my head, with something similar to glasses attached to it. All of the sudden, I was on a square planet, green and grey, and I walked for two or three steps; then, obviously, being the planet squared, I was on the brink of an abyss, a black abyss. The definition of the experience was actually not so refined; of course, it was twentyfive years ago. Now I tried the Oculus experience and I must say that, although the polygons are much more numerous and defined, the concept is the same. In a way, almost nothing has happened in the past twentyfive years.[8]

Now, consider the differentiation between the different programs that are proposed; for instance, "Spaces," the program proposed by Facebook. If we have a look at these different programs, we see that the concept "virtual reality," is now differentiating internally creating a perceptual, synesthetic, tridimensional environment and the devices for sharing an augmented reality.

What is interesting for me in this process of technical experimentation and innovation is, essentially, the possibility of experiencing experience. I mean, what is happening now? So far, in the 25 years of development of the network, my guess was that the main direction of research was not virtual reality. Of course, when I saw the virtual reality in Toronto for the first time, I could barely imagine what was going to happen in the Internet space. The network changed everything and, in a sense, put the virtual reality concept in a corner.

What conceptual shifts are we experiencing, at present?

I would say that we are going beyond the dimension of flying over, which is the essential feature of the navigating experience of the Internet: we are shifting from the flying over experience to the possibility of immersion. What is the difference between the two? I try to imagine that we are shifting from an activity which was essentially the flying over activity, that means approaching to the territory, but at the same time experiencing

a sort of continuous expansion of the territory itself. This is essentially the experience that we make inside the net. What happens then? Time is continuously intensified, because we are trying to know everything, but everything escapes all the time to our possibility of knowledge. The closer we get, the more the field is enhanced. The very perception of time is changing, the very experience of time is changing in a painful way, because we have the perception that the more we run, the less we have the possibility of knowing the world of the field we are approaching and distancing ourselves from at the same time.[9]

Now I think that something is changing essentially at the level of the perception of time.[10] The immersive experience is in a sense a restoration of the Bergsonian concept of duration. You are inside an experience that is fully integrated with your sensorium. You are not flying over, you are surrounded. This is a sort of relaxing (from the point of view of the perception of time) experience and at the same time a sort of rupture, breaking the relation with the outside.[11] While in the flying over of the net you are continuously dealing with what is beyond your visual field, the current shift may pave the way for the immersive experience. In the immersive environment you are surrounded and fully saturated with information. Frankly speaking, I do not know if this is really the technological future. In fact, I read a dossier in *Le Monde*[12] some time ago, and I read that the money coming from these businesses is not enough, and many of the corporations and enterprises that have invested in virtual reality are in this moment retreating their money, or are not planning to invest more. I do not know, probably it is a dead end, it is not going to be that important. I do not care. What I am interested in is, essentially, the concept—the conceptual possibility—that immersion is opening in a way divergent from the flying over experience of the last 25 years.

Now I want to try to understand what is happening from the point of view of life, in the sense of experience. Earlier I mentioned that immersion is conceptually opening a new problem. The problem is: can we experience experience itself? Firstly, the concept of experience deserves to be better explained. Heidegger says something[13] about that and he reminds us that in the word "experience" there is the death inside: Ex perire. Perire in Latin means "to die," and ex means: "from." Then, the experience is the process that brings us to death thanks to the experience itself. There is a process and there is the most real of all human experiences: death. In a sense, what is suspended by the immersive concept is the relation with

death, it is the relation with the singularity of the experience itself.[14] You are experiencing something, and this is different from the Internet.

On the Internet generally you are not experiencing something; you are getting information about something, you take part in a community of signs, not of touch. In the immersive technology, you are experiencing the environment that you are immersed in. Is it experience? Well, it is first of all a repeatable experience; secondly, it is an experience that has been created and experienced before you by the engineers, by the graphic designers, and so on. Are we shifting, are we entering a dimension in which our life is going to be the experience of, the experience at the second degree? And by that, I mean experiencing something that has been prepared by an engineer, by an enterprise (and so on) beforehand.

Before I get to my closing statement, I want to give you some information that I take from—and I go back to—the film of Polanski. Some information about sex, just to name a subject that I know very little about.

Sex by numbers is the title of a book written by a German (of course!) Professor at Cambridge University, David Spiegelhalter, who acknowledges that it's difficult to speak about others' sex habits. He affirms that, in fact, he cannot be perfectly sure of what he's saying, but he has been studying the subject for many years by reading data and interviewing people. According to him, on average in the '90s, the frequency of sexual contacts was—it seems—five per month, among couples of all ages. Then, in the first decade of the 2000s, it seems that sexual contacts were four every month. In the second decade of the century, the sexual contacts seem to be 2.5 every month.[15] Following the data there is a constant diminishing of sexual intercourses in time.

Moreover, there is also a post-sexual culture that is growing on the Net. A young 19-year-old American man, called Ryan Hoover, writes in a blog the following passage (his post is full of interesting emoticons and the message is incredibly ironic, and sharp, and very nice, in a sense):

> I grew up with computers and the internet, shaping my world view and relationships. I'm considered a 'digital native'. Technology often brings us together, but it has also spread generations apart. Try calling a millennial on the phone. Soon, future generations will be born into an AI world. Kids will form real, intimate relationships with artificial beings. And in many cases, these replicants will be better than real people. They'll be smarter, kinder, more interesting. Will 'AI natives' seek human relationships? Will they have sex?[16]

I grew up with computers and the internet, shaping my world view and relationships. I'm considered a "digital native".

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Soon, future generations will be born into an AI world. Kids will form real, intimate relationships with artificial beings.

And in many cases, these replicants will be better than real people. They'll be smarter, kinder, more interesting.

Will "AI natives" seek human relationships? Will they have sex? ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Fig. 1 Ryan Hoovers blog passage

Why should we have sex with them? Hoover says: "why should I have sex with a human being? They are brutal, less and less interesting, less and less nice. My AI objects are much kinder, much more civilized, much more interesting. The point is that, the more we interact with these "technological aliens," the more we become brutal, and uninteresting, and bad. The more those aliens take part in the relation with human beings, with *young, ironic, interesting* human beings, like this man Ryan Hoover, the more those aliens will be interesting for us. Not for us, actually; for the next generation of human beings. So, you see, probably there is a way out from the global civil war. I am just not sure that is exactly what we are expecting for [the future] (Fig. 1).

Notes

1. Carnage, 2011: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0001692486/.
2. Lovink, founding director of the Institute of Network Cultures.
3. In order to deepen the psychological effect of living a life at distance on the network both for work and intimate relationships, cfr. Wallace (2015).
4. Here the author refers to the GAFAM corporations Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft.

5. An important personality in the American system of power of the last forty, fifty years: he was the National Security Adviser of President Carter and executive director of the Trilateral Commission during Carter's administration (1977–1981).
6. Brzeziński (2016).
7. One of the references of this scenario is the emergence of the singularity, a machine that is indiscernible from human beings while at the same time it is incredibly more intelligent not only of each individual but of the entire humankind. The major positive cantor of the singularity emergence is Ray Kurzwail (2005), while a critical vision of singularity is discussed in Bostrom (2014).
8. The new interest on augmented and virtual reality is testified by the popularity of the subject in the technical and general literature. For more details on the new explosion of researches and developments in the area we suggest Lanier (2017) and Harris (2018) for a story of the Oculus a virtual reality project that was funded by Facebook after keeping the attention of Mark Zuckerberg in person.
9. The transformation of time due to the amplification of the technological infrastructure is at the center of interests both of sociologists and of technologists and philosophers. In order to obtain some hints of the research field we suggest consulting Crary (2014), Rosa (2010) for a sociological analysis of acceleration.
10. The category of time is changing profoundly, because of the interference of technological devices which are more rapid than human beings in accomplishing some tasks. Stiegler (2017) offers a philosophical discussion of the consequences on perception of the transformation of the category of time. From Kant on we have agreed that time and space are the form of the transcendental intuition that is the possibility condition of perception. But it is also true that technological devices are media that interfere with the organization of perception as well. According to Benjamin (1935) one of the effects of the technical reproducibility of the artistic works is that we experience a transformation of perception that affect the way we can understand and organize art, but also the perception of the presence and the existence of the otherness. At the same time the category of duration is affected by the relationship of visible and invisible presences that transform how we feel and what we can experience.
11. The relationship between human perception and external world is always problematic from Kant *Critique of pure reason* (1781) on. We can legitimate a relationship with the external world only starting from the organization of the cognitive structure of the human beings. Such a structure is bounded by its own limits. The only external things that we can perceive and organize is related to the way the phenomena are perceived and understood.

However, if there are devices that intervene in the organization of phenomena, and there is no way to escape such devices for the organization and justification of our believes on the world, then we have to solve a difficult epistemic problem. How can we guarantee that what we are perceiving as the external world with the help of the infrastructure that organizes our perception, is the external world? It is possible that the devices that allow the relationships with the external world are at the same time creating the shape of what we can perceive that is not completely related with an external reality in itself. The psychotic view of the world is mediated via the altered perception of the patient. But what if everybody was persuaded that his or her personal gaze, organized according to his or her preferences by the infrastructure is the external world, no matter what is really happening outside our perception? The psychotic gaze will be the normality, and not the exception, and the consensus on the meaning and the appearance of phenomena will be at risk.

12. Le Monde (2018).
13. The author refers to Kisiel (1993, 329), for an explanation of the concept of existence in Heidegger. According to this concept, existence is possible only inside a world, but the meaning of the existence is a possibility that can or cannot be given. The experience is related to ex-perire which is the possibility to experience something that is related to the death. It is possible to be in the world without knowing it, as the objects are. The distinction between a subject and an object so, can be considered only the likelihood of experience. Such an experience can create a meaning, if it is given. The possibility of the experience, however, is allowed only within a world, here and now.
14. According to Yuk Hui (2019) the only way out being blocked within an inorganic technological infrastructure is that we acknowledge the possibility of contingency, within the cosmotechnics scenario, a world in which nature and technics are melted in a unique presence. It is not possible, according to Hui to experience experience and nature without the technical infrastructure, we are immerged in the technical environment that organizes the infrastructure of perception. But inside the infrastructure, it is necessary to render possible the contingency, the unpredictability of life. The risk is that the technical infrastructure ejects contingency by relying only on recursivity and repetition. According to Bifo, instead, the only possibility to experience death and contingency is outside the technical environment and the digital infrastructure.
15. Spiegelhalter (2015).
16. Hoover (2016).

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On Mediated Disrespect: Theoretical Considerations About the Political Sphere in Social Media

Julia Preisker

Whether in the case of migration and escape, feminist empowerment, or other strategies of inequity's visualization, currently communication in digital cultures is based on a harsh language of disrespect and injury. Of course, insulting and discriminatory speech did not start with digital communication. Nevertheless, we need to consider the circumstances and requirements our current communicative setting depends on. The rise of disrespectful language entails a dichotomic discussion about its handling. So, the discourses include demands of both censorship and self-empowerment, free speech and hate speech.[1] The question I'm primarily interested in in this context refers to the current spatial requirement of communication and negotiation. How is the political environment constituted that we are communicating and acting in?[2]

In this respect, offensive language—in accordance with Jennifer Eickelmann's brilliant scrutiny I will refer to this as mediated disrespect hereinafter[3]—cannot be understood as individual expression of opinions by some users only, but as embedded in a substruction including both socio-political discourses and media usage.

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If we focus on an online self in a political context, we need to ask how political subjects are influenced and constituted by their digital environment. In this respect, media don't represent political negotiations but create them performatively.

I would like to illustrate that this complex structure of digital culture is not acknowledged by using algorithmic calculation and pattern recognition to predetermine and reduce personal preferences to oversimplified categories.[4] Therefore, I argue that mediated disrespect is constituted by filter bubbles and echo chambers, spaces that exclude specific political opinions by filtering and matching alleged accordance. When differences are eliminated, discrimination dominates political debates. Reading this with Chantal Mouffe in mind, algorithmic structure of digital cultures both is based on and does support a pursuit of consensus. Echo chambers indurate antagonistic positions instead of encouraging "real" political exchange.

On these grounds the constitution of an online self depends on notions digital network's usage is currently based on. Thus, mediated disrespect is not assigned to individual verbalism, but results from digital culture's structure, which includes both human and non-human actors as well as political discourses.

Back to the Future—Myth and History of Digital Media

German regional elections in the federal state Thüringen took place on October 27, 2019. The party with the second-highest votes was the far-right political party *AfD* (Alternative for Germany), which caused many comments on Twitter. The German journalist and author Hasnain Kazim has criticized the voters for devolving power to far-right extremists. For this, they should be accountable, he wrote.[5] Because of his statement, he received abuses, insults, and even death threats.[6] Furthermore, he was added to a death list.[7] Since political incidents are discussed online, this is not an individual case. But who are these people, "who assume death threats as part of free speech"?[8] Is online harassment simply a result of virtual anonymity?

In this paper, I would like to connect my considerations on a so-called "online self" to the main aspects discussed at the conference in Rome by continuing the journey "into the heart of digital cultures."

Therefore, I would like to focus on the political effects of cultures increasingly influenced by digital technologies. Even though the term "online self" indicates a subject surrounded by and acting in a virtual environment only, I will argue for a fusion of both virtuality and reality determining our social and political acting. Furthermore, I claim that an online self cannot be seen as a self-governed subject but as a constitution of human and non-human actions embedded in technical, social, and political conditions.

Consequently, the way of political communication nowadays does not depend on individual opinions only (if it ever has): The increase of digital utilization constitutes social and political discourses as well.

In this respect, it is helpful to consider media as performative as "[t]hey are not simply descriptive but also prescriptive and performative in all senses of that word".[9] So, media—in this context, media based on algorithms—don't just represent (political) discourses, but constitute them as well. Thus, my opening question is: which kind of political debate offer digital networks currently? In which way do they constitute themselves as political exchange platforms?

To scrutinize the current political environment, I would like to refer to Mouffe's concept of the Political. She notices a striving for the consensus of political opinions, allegedly to overcome differences that end in fights and enmity. Her critique of this method of erasing diversity and plurality goes hand in hand with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's thinking of networks "as being within a neoliberal environment, which "valorize[.] consensus, balance and 'comfort'".[10] This is tied to the idea of media both in general and its socio-political function in particular.

The myth—as Chun calls it[11]—of the digital media's history is often retold as a one-sided story. Historically we can determine a specific discourse that affects our current understanding of social media substantially.

"Internet" pioneers in the 1980s and 1990s understood virtual space as completely separated from a non-virtual state authority. As John Perry Barlow claimed in his 1996 *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, the aim was to constitute a society based on the notion of "the" Internet as an open-minded, incorporeal spatial system of collaboration and egalitarianism without any hierarchical restrictions. The implied premise of this opinion was a media structure of collaboration, participation, and, correspondingly, a free, democratic and user-centered space. As Barlow claimed, cyberspace should be an independent, impartial, and virtual

sphere of emancipation and of political, social, and cultural equality. It was to be seen as an alternative to the sovereignty of established powers based on a strict separation of reality and virtuality: "This governance will arise according to the conditions of our world, not yours [you being Governments of the Industrial World, note from the author]. Our world is different".[12] This attests to a utopian understanding of cyberspace as a counter-hegemonic concept of a highly accessible, mobile, and virtual space.

Nowadays, with respect to digital media current discourses about its influence on everyday actions can be described as ambivalent. Euphoric opinions of egalitarian and investigative platforms on the one hand and dystopic notions of total surveillance on the other hand form the frame in which social influence of digital media is discussed. Techno-euphoric positions understood the sheer availability of a so-called "open" communication as enabling a free and equal exchange, in contrast to conventional media types. The technological possibilities of cross-border, mobile communication in "real time" seemed to evoke a culture of respectful communication.

Today we are witnessing a different approach that is far more pessimistic regarding the very idea of a free, egalitarian, and inclusive Internet:

> Because of its technical architecture the Internet bursts the structures of conventional media types: de-centrality, openness, interactivity, and therefore the deregulation of defined consumer and producer roles is presumed to be the basis for [...] non-hierarchical communication beyond national and cultural borders. But at the same time, and particularly from a global perspective, the Internet is affected by a 'digital divide' due to its access and usage possibilities and its exclusionary practices. Hence processes of marginalization have strengthened instead of decreased, as has been pointed out and criticized over the last years.[13]

By now the notion of an open and independent cyberspace has been fully replaced by one determined by the political mechanisms of national governments and by economic interests. Previously, actors on social media platforms were understood and celebrated as possessing a hybrid agency, which fuses the roles of producer and consumer.[14] This one-sided narrative reduces users to clicks, likes, and shares. Therefore they matter as consumers only.[15]

This story opposes two intentions in a dichotomic way: On the one hand, there is the normalized aim of some cyberspace pioneers to create a contra-hegemonial and non-hierarchical space. On the other hand, their failure is connected with the latest development of the Internet as "Web 2.0". The current narration describes social media as a space of both governmental surveillance and monitoring as well as economic profit. This way of storytelling regarding digital media seems to be noticeable. There are other stories based on this binary logic, for instance social media platforms solely seen as either surveillance's assistants or technologies on behalf of self-empowerment.[16]

Performativity of Mediated Disrespect: A Way to Think About a "New" Media's Ontology

From a media philosophical perspective, this binary storytelling refers to an inflexible and generalized ontological status of media. It understands media as a container, filled with content and discourses, just represented but not determined by media itself. Instead of supporting this passive status, I would like to carve out the processual character of media as a crucial aspect of their ontology.[17] This means, to regard media not as static but as processual. In this respect, it is possible to acknowledge a constitutive effect of media. As media must be seen as part of this "process of becoming a world (*Welten*)"[18] we need to review their political potential, too. The contrary assumptions of Social Media understood as economic means or as political self-empowerment both fall short. The latest incidents of Facebook's influence on elections illustrate how digital media are integrated in socio-political decisions.

Consequently, I would like to consider media as performative to focus on its constitutive effect. Regarding mediated disrespect, the performative character appears even more explicitly: a violent, injuring speech is neither a result of digital communication only nor an expression of individual opinion. It is neither free speech nor hate speech, it is both. To understand media as performative means to acknowledge an interaction between human and non-human actors, between digital technologies and political notions. Media and its usage are never just one part of this framework. Since media are not solely existing in virtual space, we need to recognize their influence (which includes mediated disrespect) on our daily life.

A main factor of this development seems to be the interrelationship of reality and virtuality. Richard Grusin uses the term "premediation" to describe the growing interdependency of reality and virtuality.[19] The almost infinite possibilities for combining software applications allow the media to permeate everyday life. The effect of what Grusin terms "media everyday" is a thorough regulation of daily experiences, as social interactions are transformed into digital media experiences. They are re-mediated because these social interactions happen in an environment already determined by mediation. According to Grusin, the concept of premedation describes the integration of new media usage "in different aesthetic, sociotechnical and political formations".[20] Technological devices and applications are embedded in social and political structures, and accordingly serve as a political instrument. As our understanding of individuality, self-conception, and community is influenced by media structures, it is important to consider the fact that online communication affects all levels of reality, as exemplified by online harassment and its real-life effect on victims.[21] Given this development it is no longer reasonable or even possible to think in terms of two autonomous categories of reality and virtuality rather than of different levels of reality, because "[t]he real is no longer that which is free from mediation, but that which is thoroughly enmeshed with networks of social, technical, aesthetic, political, cultural, or economic mediation".[22]

Ten years after Grusin's study the increase of media technology in both private and public spheres can be described as a mechanization of daily-used objects. Phenomena like "Internet of things"[23] or "ubiquitous computing"[24] cross-link these items (e.g., television, fridges, even umbrellas), but also provide whole apartments[25] with data stream, so that we should, supposedly, be better equipped to regulate our home equipment en route. The precondition for using these technologies is the possession of a smartphone, tablet, or any other mobile end device with internet connection that allows us to save and use the sampled data.[26] As media and technologies interfuse everyday life, both private and public environments are increasingly mediated.[27] So, there is no difference between a real and a virtual space anymore. I would like to use the term "post private/post public space," produced by coexistence of humans and media. Therefore, I assume that the relation between humans and media determines both human existence in general and political discourses in particular. This proposition rests on the hypothesis that existence is not possible in a singular, segregated way, but depends

on the presence of others—a concept stressed by philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,[28] Karl Marx,[29] or Hannah Arendt. The notion of this reference toward others is historically understood as a relation between human actors only.[30] In today's sociological and cultural studies being-with is understood more heterogeneously, because they bring together entities "that are in classical ontological manner attributed to different states of being (*Seinsbezirke*)",[31] including.

> Bruno Latour's famous human and nonhuman actors who are persons and artifacts, things belonging to both culture and nature, the intelligible and the sensitive, the reflexive and the irreflexive, the technical and the aesthetic, images and objects or even material and immaterial like ghosts, gods and ancestors as described by Descola or Gell.[32]

Jean-Luc Nancy claims consistently that "[b]eing cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence".[33] Nancy names "all bodies"—not humans only—as possible reference points of being-with (*Mit-Sein*).[34] In doing so, he grants "technology" an additional place next to nature, which has "a relatively autonomous own order".[35] Although in this co-ontology technology is to be understood in a larger context of meaning that goes beyond algorithmic media, he admits an "uncoordinated simultaneity of things and being." The emphasis on their "co-affiliations" is an indication for Nancy's notion of being-with including technical objects.[36]

From a media and cultural science perspective thoughts about a "co," like collectives[37] coexistences[38] or companions[39] focus on "the stake of non-human, especially technical *entities* regarding human subjectivity, sociality, and communication".[40] In this respect, technologies and media constitute human action instead of being merely tools or assistants. Due to the technological history of the twentieth century, the relationship between human and non-human actors has increasingly become entangled. Media in its ubiquitous change is not directed to certain places but to operate proactively, intelligibly and responsive within a mediated space. That is why it is not possible anymore to consider human actions as being detached from media. So-called smart technologies interfuse more and more areas of life and configure cohabitation between media and humans clearly. Private areas are interconnected with technical systems that record, accompany and interfuse almost every sector of habitation.[41] In addition,

the human body becomes the surface and playing field of media technological development due to sensitive sensors and self-learning, dynamic prostheses.[42] Via this extended and replaceable body mobile and intelligent media systems are brought into public space. Actions that once needed specific locations can now be performed in a mobile and delocalized way. Shopping, communicating, listening to music, watching movies, or TV shows—there is hardly an activity that couldn't be done "anytime and anywhere." This is what the term post private/post public space means. The ubiquitous use of algorithmic media co-determines the political area, too. Acting politically without using media is no longer an option (if it ever was).

Post Private and Post Public: Being-With Media

Machines, technologies, media—none of these can be considered mere tools for human actions any longer. While scholars such as Ernst Kapp or Marshall McLuhan still understood media as prosthetic extension and aid of the human body, media have meanwhile gained the status of "technical agents," due to the ubiquitous diffusion and development toward self-contained media technologies. So, we can determine a shift within the relationship between man and media. Media and technology are not limited to human use; in fact, they accompany human existence as roommates, traffic participants, communication partners, consultants, or teammates as well as opponents. Whether Internet of Things or Social Media platforms, data collections, algorithmic calculations, or codes: media technologies significantly influence human action. This is how machines and technologies become agents: media give distinction to discourses, constitute modes of action and thinking, and finally become part of negotiations in political realms and power structures. This is crucial regarding a constitution of an online self. Within the perspective of human and non-human agents it is no longer possible to think about an online self as an autonomously acting human subject but as influenced by its media environment. Therefore, both political negotiation in general and mediated disrespect in particular can be seen as highly effected by this complex structure of digital culture. In newer existential-philosophical movements the production of sense or meaning is no longer attributed to human actors only. Pretended fixed meanings give way to a more open concept of sense: Whereas "sense used to come about through

a meaning-making act, it now becomes a transcategorial notion, an assemblage emerging from the non-signifying collaborative practices of humans, objects, and machines".[43] In the late 1950s, Gilbert Simondon submitted a similar concept of man's and technology's coexistence by using the term "open machine." He places humans in an open relationship to objects and understands human being as a "permanent organizer and as a living interpreter of the interrelationship of machines".[44]

Thus, technical objects achieved a status that goes far beyond that of meaningless tools or instruments. Subsequent to Nancy's notion, it is Erich Hörl who includes technical objects in the determination of meaning (*Sinn*):

> Hörl describes the emergence of a technology that faces humans no longer objectively but surrounds them environmentally. In doing so, he shifts the question of coexistence towards a being-with (here, *Zusammen-Sein*) with technical entities, environments and dispositives.[45]

The emergence of intelligent media systems which re-establish the conditions of being-with again, gives new relevance to the concept of meaningful and constitutive media technologies.

Even the very being-with between humans and technology shifts the subject into a new context of meaning; and this context is fluid, unstable, and changeable. Once meaning is no longer constituted by human ideas and human ways of thinking, but within a frame of reference of human and technology/human and media, the subject no longer acts like a single constitutive benchmark. The relationship between human and media is therefore neither stable nor fixed, because the status and the definition of media are not fixed either. If according to Bolter and Grusin, media exist only in their remediation, then they never face a stable subject as a fixed entity. Categories of both the human subject and media exist only in relation to their counterpart. The exterior emphasized by Nancy no longer becomes tangible through the perspective of remediation.

Besides, following Jay David Bolter and Grusin, digital media "oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity".[46] Thereby a clear attribution is rendered impossible, as digital media are absorbed into their environment. A conscious handling of something that seems "to erase itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium"[47] leads to a precarious relationship that is "in principle conflictual, inconstant and uncertain".[48] By changing between

immediacy and transparency, media eludes any fixation and makes it impossible to relate to it consciously and stably.

However, the very being-with and every ontological coexistence already seem to imply a precarious relationship with an outside world. Similar to Nancy, Henry Staten describes being in a relation to its outside perception. He uses the term "constitutive outside," which refers to a concept of identity that always depends on an external perspective. Therefore, the perception of an outside position is necessary to constitute identity. This means that the existence of any identity is relational and based on the affirmation of a different position. As another side to the same coin, Staten refers to the establishment of difference, which includes a being-with. According to Staten, being-with is based on the recognition of difference. If one's identity depends on the attribution of an external position, one's own position will always remain in a vulnerable, endangered, and precarious state. The constitution of the identity of "we" is regulated by the creation of a "they," which implicates, on the one hand, a demarcation of positions. But on the other hand, by means of this demarcation we and they refer to each other. This interdependency could result in the possibility of social exclusion, hierarchy, and degradation—because, as Staten argues, a given identity is tied to the idea of hierarchy by establishing a system of power, which always includes social marginalization.[49] Hence, thinking of coexistence as a relative term always involves the danger of an unequal power relation.

The Political Dimension of Digital Media

Mouffe tries to make the status of this difference productive within her concept of the political. In her view the political can be understood "as a space of power, conflict and antagonism".[50] However, as she emphasizes, we can observe a post-political vision of globalization and universalization of liberal democracy as it arises in new media communication based on the construction of consensual echo chambers. This view of international relations has to be considered as an attempt to overcome antagonistic aspects of the political. In Mouffe's opinion, the aim of this perspective is to establish "a world 'beyond left and right', 'beyond hegemony', 'beyond sovereignty' and 'beyond antagonism'" through the constitution of a rational, that is, a fully inclusive consensus.[51] But the central task of democratic politics is to accept the pluralism of political identities to—as she declares—"envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public

sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted".[52] Otherwise, the concept of political consistency, which includes the negation of antagonism, will strengthen the antagonistic potential both within politics and within society even more radically. The politics of consensus deny a separation of different positions. As a result, they achieve precisely the opposite: The assertion of consensus causes an intensification of this separation.

Mouffe underlines the "pluralistic nature of the social world" that includes conflicts.[53] From a post-structuralist perspective, she stresses the relational nature of political and collective identities and claims to delineate different understandings of the friend/enemy or "we"/"they" distinction, which tolerate a democratic pluralism instead of denying it. To accept and allow pluralism means to create an adversarial model that makes "the adversary" look not like an enemy that has to be destroyed, but one who has to be confronted. According to Mouffe it is not the central task of democratic politics to overcome a political enmity, but to lower the "we"/"they" distinction of antagonism by establishing symbolic and representative political procedures. Mouffe calls this view "agonism".[54] An agonistic space could perform a democratic task by turning "conflicting parties" or groups into real participants in a discussion, participants who "recognize the legitimacy of their opponent".[55] In order to do so, differentiated alternatives must be accepted.[56]

Crucially, the agonistic approach allows an emancipated and equal exchange in a political way. So, it doesn't deny a conflict, but even calls for it, as Mouffe describes this process. This conflict is different from the antagonistic fight, because it includes and accepts pluralistic stances on politics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, political exchange in a democratic way needs acknowledgment of different positions within the appropriate environment. However, Social Media such as Twitter is based on pattern recognition, which "makes cyberspace a series of echo chambers".[57] Instead of acknowledging both different positions and opinion and the very fact of an unstable precarious relationship between human subjects and digital technology, "network analyses segregate users into neighborhoods based on their intense likes and dislikes".[58] That is why Chun argues that

"data analyses compound and reflect discrimination embedded within society"[59] and thereby prevent exchange.

Since our thinking both about and within political structures is affected by being-with media on several levels, media don't just represent a means for acting politically, but also constitute political actions by establishing new categories of post private/post public spaces that are highly mediated. Media do "not just describe the world—it also now prescribes and shapes it".[60] As long as media is based on a concept that denies difference, it makes exchange between different opinions impossible. By denying difference, but forcing consensus, being-with media constitutes a precarious status of the self in regard to political action. Thus, the being-with between media and humans can be described as a deeply precarious co-existential relationship, which affects the performative form of political action, too.

What does this mean considering mediated disrespect? Aren't people responsible for the way they are commenting, because they are no longer understood as autonomously acting subjects? New laws passed in Germany[61] try to fight hate crime by accusing individual users. However this strategy is not constructive if it is aimed to increase surveillance only. We need to notice and—most importantly—to accept media putting "in place the world it discovers".[62] By creating echo chambers, we establish closed spaces of the same content repeated and confirmed. To prevent mediated disrespect, we do not need more surveillance or censorship, but an open structure that allows real conversation including confrontation of different notions. Until we have achieved this aim, it is important to make hate, discrimination, and racism visible. Hasnain Kazim and some of his colleagues found a way for doing so by founding "antiracist reading" poetry slam events called *Hate Poetry*.[63] Since 2012 journalists and authors like Kazim have read hate comments and threats in public to give us an impression of their experience. Furthermore, this is a place of conspicuousness, solidarity and self-empowerment. Once again it is shown that it is the interconnection of virtuality and reality that makes the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles even more absurd. Because media is part of our daily life and "builds the basis for an increasing number of decision-making processes",[64] we need to (re)think its political influence and the structure it is built on. The future lies in creating new ways of being political with(in) media beyond echo chambers.

Notes

1. Jennifer Eickelmann offers us a helpful discourse analysis of the so-called Hate Speech, which includes the claim of Free Speech as well. See Eickelmann (2017).
2. I'm referring here to Judith Butler's concept of performative speech and Louis Althusser's discourse analytic notion of speech (see Butler 1997; Althusser 1977). Furthermore, Hannah Arendt claimed that a political being is both an acting and a speaking person. For a detailed description, see footnote below.
3. Eickelmann (2017).
4. For a detailed analysis of pattern recognition please see the tome *Pattern Discrimination* edited by Clemens Apprich, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Florian Cramer, and Hito Steyerl.
5. Kazim (2020).
6. Since November, Kazim got several hundreds of threats daily, among them 400 death threats overall. In my opinion the right to spread these statements is reserved to the addressed person, for which reason I decided not to cite or translate any hate comments in this paper.
7. The German politician Walter Lübcke was added to a similar hit list (or enemy list) before he was murdered on June 2, 2019.
8. Kazim (2020, n.p).
9. Chun and Friedland (2019, 66).
10. Ibid., 75.
11. Ibid., 60.
12. Barlow (1996, n.p).
13. Wischermann and Thomas (2008, 11).
14. In his book *The Third Wave* Alvin Toffler coined the term "prosumer" to describe the merge of consumer's and producer's roles. See Toffler (1981).
15. According to Michaela Ott we can notice a new form of subjectivity which she describes as a "dividual" occurrence (see Ott 2015). The dividual character of online communication means a non-concluded, agglomerated form of political participation which replaces the notion of collective digital behavior. According to Ott the opposition of the intention of participation on the one side and the absorption by outside influences on the other side is crucial for digital communication (see ibid., 14f). Devices like Smartphones and Tablets, etc., pretend to create a worldwide-connected community. But this pretended collective depends no longer on temporal and spatial conditions. Rather we can notice various loose and short-term connections which are without any commitments and diverge at the same time they link. So, we can understand this procedure of continuous coincidence and separation as a rejection of classic terms like

community and the necessity of an acting self, as Gerald Raunig argues (see Raunig 2016).

16. Although the main argument in the context of surveillance is the technological condition, Chun pointed out that it is not a question of technology but socially ambitions (see Chun and Friedland 2015, 5).
17. Lisa Handel in her distinguished critiques proposes the term onto-mediality to focus on the processual character of media (see Handel 2018).
18. Handel (2018, 22).
19. Since the economic power of new media platforms gained in importance along with the emergence of strategies to combat terrorism (particularly since 9/11), our everyday social actions are affected by digital media in the name of security (see Grusin 2010, 3).
20. Grusin (2010, 2). Therefore, premedation represents a control system ensuring the public's security. It "works to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systematic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack" (ibid., 3). For this purpose, worldwide-interconnected media formats are used to track every transaction of communication. Accordingly, media structure can be understood as a function of political surveillance. Furthermore, Grusin delineates a double logic of premediation: the logic of maintaining a state of fear on the one hand and of creating a system of securitization and self-control on the other. Therefore, user participation in this system is "encouraged for security purposes," not only by making all media transactions "easily and readily available but also by making them […] pleasurable" (ibid., 126). Being part of such a ubiquitous and accelerated mediascape makes us feel safe and prepared for any potential traumatic experience in the future. Therefore, we do not just accept every kind of control and monitoring; we actually support and collaborate with this system of surveillance. In this sense, new media can be seen as a mechanism and means for the constitution of hegemony.
21. For a detailed analysis of various cases of online harassment see Chun and Friedland (2015) and Eickelmann (2017).
22. Grusin (2010, 3).
23. Florian Sprenger and Christoph Engemann have published an edited volume regarding the phenomenon of Internet of Things in German in 2015. See Sprenger and Engemann (2015).
24. For instance, Ekman et al. (2015).
25. Within the discussion of Internet of Things Stefan Rieger examines cultures of living nowadays and in the past (see Rieger 2015).
26. But the right to use these data is reversed to the companies providing the technologies and applications.

27. For further information regarding the topic of media use in private and public space, see Bublitz (2010).
28. In this context I refer to Hegel's master–slave dialectic. See Hegel (1977).
29. This refers to the dialectical principle of existence, social existence and consciousness in Marx's premise of dialectical materialism. See Marx (1979).
30. Arguably, Hannah Arendt is one of the most famous theorists who claim that human acting depends on differentiation from others. By acting (which includes both speech and action), we distinguish ourselves from others which means acting is only possible within *society*. See Arendt (1958).
31. Engell and Siegert (2012, 5).
32. Ibid.
33. Nancy (2000, 3) (original emphasis).
34. Ibid., 20.
35. Ibid., 2.
36. Ibid., 4.
37. See Latour (1999) and Engell and Siegert (2012).
38. See Bennke et al. (2018).
39. See Haraway (2005).
40. Bennke et al. (2018, 2) (original emphasis).
41. For further reading see Rieger (2015). Rieger claims a caesura within the housing situation: enclosed living does not provide security against threats from outside anymore—rather, it is the environmental technology itself that is menacing now (see Rieger 2015, 369f.).
42. About the technical extension of humans, see Harrasser (2013).
43. Bennke et al. (2018, 12).
44. Simondon (1980, 4).
45. Bennke et al. (2018, 5).
46. Bolter and Grusin (2000, 19).
47. Ibid., 24.
48. Bennke et al. (2018, 7).
49. Judith Butler makes this precarious relationship between different positions the center of her *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* as she describes the body itself as a precarious phenomenon (see Butler 2015). The very effect of being-exposed prevents it from being "neither autonomous nor sovereign or singular" (Bennke et al. 2018, 11). Referring to the vulnerability of the body, she writes in *Frames of War*: "[…] in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition. Its very persistence depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to 'be' in the sense of 'persist' it must rely on what is outside itself" (Butler 2009, 33).
50. Mouffe (2005, 9).

51. Ibid., 2.
52. Ibid., 3.
53. Ibid., 10.
54. Ibid., 20.
55. Ibid.
56. At this point I see a correlation between Mouffe and Hannah Arendt's perspectives on the political. Arendt's view on the political depends on the understanding of a space of public deliberation. A political human being is a speaking and acting person (see Arendt 1958, 24–25), which presumes the understanding of action and speech as the main characteristics of the political sphere since ancient Greece, where "speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind" (ibid.). Beyond that, she stresses the acknowledgment of the coincidence of both speech and action: " […] and this originally meant not only that most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action" (ibid., 25–26). Regarding to violence she records: "[o]nly sheer violence is mute" (ibid., 26), which would be interesting to think about having Judith Butler's perspective on violence of speech in mind (see Butler 1997).
57. Chun and Friedland (2019, 60).
58. Ibid., 61.
59. Ibid., 62. Chun uses the term homophily ('love as love of the same') to describe the process of pattern discrimination. She argues that "segregation in form of homophily lies at their conceptual core," because it "distinguishes and discriminates between allegedly equal nodes" (ibid.). To burst these patterns, she suggests "to create new algorithms, new hypotheses, new grounding axioms" and "to reembrace critical theory: feminism, ethnic studies, deconstruction, and yes, even psychoanalysis […]" (ibid.).
60. Chun and Leeker (2017, 79).
61. The German Federal Office of Criminal Investigation demands a new law forces Social Media companies to record hate comments. Critical warnings caution against this procedure, because it would enable access to communication devices and data storage, which is not conformable with the data privacy statement within the German constitutional laws (see Völlinger 2019).
62. Chun and Friedland (2019, 62).
63. Hate Poetry (n.d.).
64. Apprich (2019, 118).

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Bigger Than You: Big Data and Obesity: An Inquiry Toward Decelerationist Aesthetics

Katherine Behar

> I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies.
> —Spinoza, in *Ethics*

This quote from Spinoza seems an unlikely launching pad for a discussion of the new intimacies arising between humans' bigness and big data. Yet, by considering human activities through the elegant, elemental figures of geometry, we shall see how Spinoza gets us straight into the thick thicknesses of things.

Big data refers to the massive quantity of records that are captured, amassed, and mined in the wake of digitally structured actions. It is the sum total of records of actions—the exponential archive of every component transaction captured in every data trail. These actions may originate from human or nonhuman protagonists (e.g., online shoppers or particle accelerators) and may describe human or nonhuman referents

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(e.g., medical data or atmospheric data). But this essay will not address data generated by or descriptive of nonhuman objects. Instead, I will adopt an object-oriented feminist perspective, arriving at the nonhuman by following big data as it restructures the human.[1] Beginning with the work that humans—in the conventional sense, individual subjects—do as the producers of big data, I'll describe how, by wielding Spinoza's "lines, planes, and bodies," big data unproduces and deindividualizes its subjects to become transhuman objects, something, I'll argue, far *vaguer* than any small subject could be.

This essay will also show how, through its materiality, big data models what I call *decelerationist aesthetics*. In decelerationist aesthetics, the aesthetic properties, proclivities, and performances of objects come to defy the accelerationist imperative to be nimbly individuated.[2] Decelerationist aesthetics rejects atomistic, liberal, humanist subjects; this unit of self is too consonant with capitalist relations and functions. Instead, decelerationist aesthetics favors transhuman sociality embodied in particulate, mattered objects; the aesthetic form of such objects resists capitalist speed and immediacy by taking back and taking up space and time. In just this way, as we shall see, big data calls into question the conventions by which humans are defined as discrete entities, and individual scales of agency are made to form central binding pillars of social existence through which bodies are drawn into relations of power and pathos.

So let us begin. *En route*, as we work our way up to Spinoza's "lines, planes, and bodies," we'll start by taking stock of the simplest geometrical unit: the point.

Points: Amassing Data Points

"Data is the plastic of [the] new New Economy," announces GigaOM founder Om Malik,[3] thereby suggesting—without a shred of cynicism—that like plastic, data is malleable enough to meet every conceivable need, and its resulting pervasiveness will transform every nook and cranny of the global economy. Yet we can take data's comparison to plastic in another way, too. Consider the oft-cited University of Southern California study that calculated the world's data in 2007 at 295 exabytes, which, burned to disc, would fill a stack of CDs reaching beyond the moon. This memorably staggering quantity of CDs is an appropriate analogy, because CDs are junk plastic, a breath away from landfill. Big data is plastic in this sense too—it persists, awfully, smothering us with its uselessness.

Even so, big data maintains an unshakeable aura of worth. On the one hand, enterprise stands ready to reap it, no doubt at least in part informed by the realization that humans are at real risk of depleting organic resources in the natural world. And indeed, the buzz around big data leaves corporations breathless with anticipation over potential profit from what appears to be an inexhaustible geyser of bits. On the other hand, big data's buzz renders individual consumers breathless for a different reason; they are flushed-faced with caution and reproach, indignant over worth stolen away.

Surely enough, a major source of big data is the tracking of individuals' online activity in Internet storefronts, social media spaces, and the like. In a typical process, humans' transactions are tracked and captured in profiles in the form of personally identifiable data points, which are seamlessly aggregated by corporations, and cross-compared or "mined" through analytics. Value is created when large-scale patterns, which emerge in analytics, can be tied back to the original data points and, by extension, to the profiles of individual producers and consumers.[4] Because this process occurs at multiple levels and is likely to span multiple proprietary platforms, data ownership is fraught.

As a result, many individuals take exception to what they see as the exploitation of their personal data, and protest for the establishment of legal protections[5] and technical constraints[6] to regulate the collection and use of personally identifiable data.[7] Yet, the argument to protect personal data from exploitation is an odd objection because, on the face of things, it mistakes what data under capitalism is. Is data like plastic, or is it something special, distinctive—even distinctively human?

Plainly enough, data seems to be like plastic, the product of human labor—it is, after all, produced by all that clicking. But seeing our personal data in a corporation's clutches leaves us feeling violated, and our instinctive urge to protect it amounts to treating data as no ordinary product, but something very personal: an extension, I would contend, of the physical human body. Indeed, arguments for data privacy rhetorically position data as *bodily* (deserving of the same protections from exploitation under capitalism that the body itself enjoys), rather than as a product of labor (which is fair game for capitalist exploitation).

In "The Body as Accumulation Strategy," David Harvey explains, "While capitalists may have full rights to the commodity labor power, they do not have legal rights over the person of the laborer (that would be slavery)."[8] He continues, "The capitalist has not the formal right to

put the body of the person at risk... and working practices that do so are open to challenge."[9] I suggest that these are the same grounds on which big data practices are disputed. If we take seriously this weird recategorization of object as part-of-subject, Obama's Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights[10] is directly analogous to OSHA.[11]

Note that Harvey's concerns lie with labor power, something produced by a category of action that cannot originate with any individual. Human subjects labor to make big data and have something at stake in each singular data point, but labor power happens at a "bigger" scale that is beyond the subject.

Scale, i.e., "bigness," is big data's source, its promise, and its Achilles' heel. For example, the *Economist, Forbes*, and the World Economic Forum have predicted a "data deluge,"[12] and tech journalist Colin Brown describes "a world gorging on data in the hope of turning those information streams into rivers of gold"[13]—which is to say, into a commodity just like gold, which would have minimal use value and might come to exist purely in exchange. The nightmare is to let data accumulate in unusable surpluses of unordered data points. All hopes are pinned on managing big data, efficiently processing the records that capture use to extract value for exchange. So big data is at once confusingly close to us and our bodies, and always on the verge of becoming just junk, neither useful nor exchangeable, like plastic, a hoarder's embarrassment.

Lines: Outlining Data Profiles

In a recent essay on big data, "The Whole is Always Smaller Than Its Parts: A Digital Test of Gabriel Tarde's Monads," Bruno Latour et al. describe a data reduction process, a data management method for producing valuable insights by enacting delimitation in a heterogeneous field of data points. To accomplish this, Latour et al. recommend drawing a line. Or more specifically, they suggest drawing a potato:

> The first [method for handling data sets] is the very humble and often unnoticed gesture we all make when we surround a list of features with a circle (a shape often referred to as a 'potato'!).[14]

Latour et al. are concerned with developing a theory that does not lapse into two levels of analysis for dealing with individuals and aggregates. Tarde's theory of monads is an elusive, "admittedly exotic notion" borrowed from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, which Latour et al. define in

bare terms as "not a part of a whole, but a *point of view* on all other entities taken *severally* and not as a totality."[15] Tarde's monads offer the type of "one level standpoint" Latour et al. seek, and they suggest that the contemporary practice of navigating databases provides a working proof of Tarde's thought. An in-depth discussion of Tarde and Latour is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is instructive that Latour's examples are drawn from the problem of searching for the identity of a human individual within a vast data set. Latour et al. search by name—what could be more subject-oriented?—and their strategy for ordering the undifferentiated sprawl of heterogeneous raw data is to group data points by drawing a figure. Their "humble... unnoticed gesture" of inscribing a line traces an edge and lends shape to a contour; they are drawing a *profile*.

A profile is a contour, a representation in outline that renders significant features. Latour's potato is precisely the use of a line to inscribe a profile into a plane of aggregated data, to create an outlined representation for the very purpose of "consider[ing] human actions and appetites." While in this particular instance Latour is, for once, after the human, his drawing operation applies equally to nonhuman objects, and a similar linear gesture appears in object-oriented ontology, in the "general inscriptive strategy" Ian Bogost, following Graham Harman, calls *ontography*.[16]

According to Bogost, the most basic kind of ontography is a list, which, as you may recall, is what Latour's potato encloses. "Ontography," Bogost explains, "is an aesthetic set theory."[17] While the potato encircles on a principle of affiliation, the list deploys a line to *line things up*, stressing difference through rhetorical disjunction.[18] Yet, both are a means of enticing a form, while allowing irreducibility.

But if the point of the profile is to render significant features, the identifiable silhouette of an individual, what are we to make of the nondescriptive graphical quality that takes place in the lining up of an ontographic list, which according to Bogost only "reveals" "on the basis of existence" without "necessarily offering clarification or description"[19]? Rhetorical strategies aside, what good is the "profile" of this proffered potato?

Latour might demur, but he and his colleagues state, "The gesture of adding a circle is simply the recognition of the outside limit of a monad...."[20] It seems that at best, this will be a lumpy approximation, too blobby for portraiture and too vague to aid identification. Surely, there comes a tipping point wherein the more detail one adds to this

profile—the more points one encloses in its line—the more bloated and less descriptive it becomes. This overstuffed potato has an odd profile indeed!

Ontography, too, is susceptible to swelling. Writes Bogost, it "is a practice of increasing the number and density.... Instead of removing elements to achieve the elegance of simplicity [which would be data reduction] ontography adds (or simply leaves) elements to accomplish the realism of multitude."[21] Blogger David Berry makes a suggestive link between object-oriented ontology's propensity to pack it in and Heidegger's notion of gigantism.[22] Though Berry protests the intermingling of humans and nonhumans in object-oriented litanies, the very "contamination" he fears signals the non-anthropocentric impurity this essay seeks to promote. The gigantic is a telling figure; it is a pathological figure, a figure in excess of self.

Big data's pathological overaccumulations symptomize capitalist excess, like plastic, and big data threatens to bloat a naive profile into a totality. Indeed, Latour et al. confirm, "Were the inquiry to continue, the 'whole world', as Leibniz said, would be 'grasped' or 'reflected' through this idiosyncratic point of view."[23] A thusly inflated profile recalls the David Foster Wallace character Norman Bombardini, who resolves to permanently overcome the loneliness inherent in what Tarde and Latour call a two-level-standpoint universe, divided between Self and Other, individual and aggregate.[24] Bombardini fixates on filling the entire universe with Self, squeezing Otherness out of the (profile) picture by aggressive consumption, an anti-Weight Watchers, reverse-diet plan to grow to infinite size. Like Bombardini, big data bingeing balloons a profile into another sign of big capitalist excess, another symptomatic silhouette of surplus: obesity.

Planes: Populating a Common Plane

The subtitle of the essay "Slow Death" by the inimitable Lauren Berlant is a parenthetical ontograph, "(Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)."[25] The last item, lateral agency, takes place across a common plane, zoned for occupancy[26] and populated by a host of factors and actors. Mimicking the plane's extensiveness, Berlant describes "ordinary life" as including and constituted by "spreading-out activities like sex or eating."[27] Devoting her essay to describing what is "vague and gestural about the subject"[28] (not unlike our bloated tuber), Berlant traces the

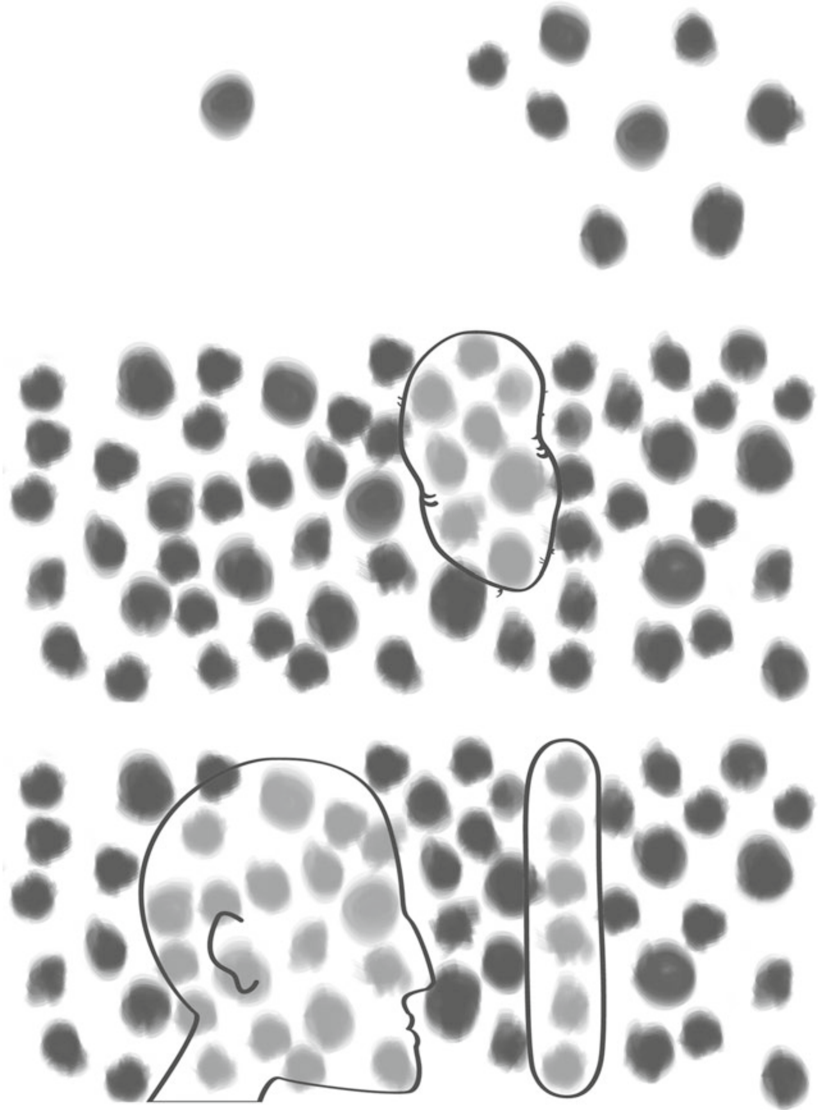
slow spread of obesity's profile as "not a thing, but a cluster of factors that only looks solid at a certain distance."[29]

Bogost writes, "An ontograph is a crowd,"[30] and for Berlant, too, the cluster that coheres is collective, crowd-like. In contrast to the individual profile Latour et al. shaped by including points to reference a person, obesity precludes personhood. For Berlant, it is always "oriented toward... self-abeyance,"[31] toward what she calls self-suspension, as opposed to self-negation.[32] Obesity is an instance of biopower that dismantles individual sovereignty, and indeed, Berlant sees obesity's profile embodying (so to speak) biopower and its relationship to managerial control. Obesity is an endemic, not an epidemic, a chronic condition requiring perpetual management, not a crisis in need of a cure; and it deals in populations, not persons. The same could be said of big data. Both are surfeits set for management and the more we eat and click, the more management we require.

Berlant uses the term *actuarial rhetoric* to describe both the material effects of the actuarial production of data, i.e., the fat data of statistics and policy, and in a figuratively broader sense, to convey how actuarial management strives "to get the fat (the substance and the people) under control."[33] With actuarial rhetoric, obesity contains fat-as-substance, fat-as-people, and data-as-fat.

Patricia Ticineto Clough and her collaborators also deal with self-abeyance in their own strange blend of substance and people in "Notes Towards a Theory of Affect-Itself."[34] Drawing from "resonances" with information theory, the life sciences, and physics, they propose to "mov[e] beyond the laborer's body assumed in the labor theory of value [which is referred] to as the body-as-organism" to arrive at a new conception of bodies "arising out of... matter as informational."[35]

Echoing Berlant's individual's self-abeyance, Clough et al. cite Akseli Virtanen and Paolo Virno to describe how affective labor has been theorized as "superced[ing] the individual" through an "abstract labor-power that is in excess of any one laborer's body." Pursuing this notion further, they ask whether it is *also* "in excess of the body conceived as human organism."[36] Whereas prior theories of affective labor already started suppressing personhood in favor of populations, shedding the sanctity of the individual laborer in favor of a "social individual," Clough et al.'s radical move extends the notion of population well beyond the social individual or crowd, and into the nonhuman world, the informational world of data.

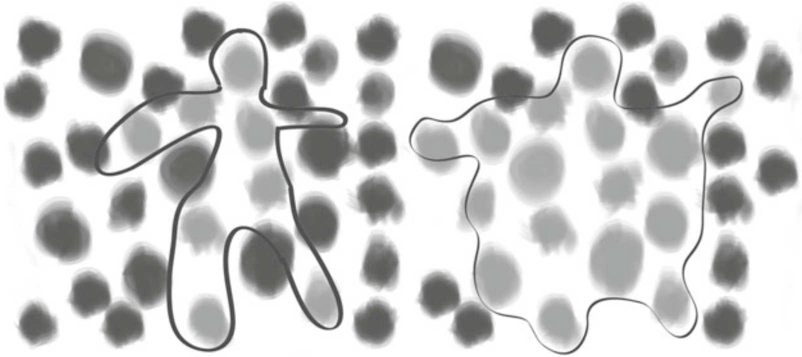


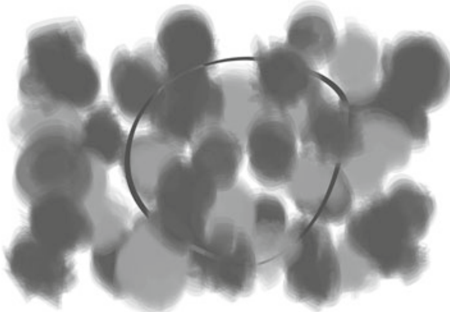
Theorizing that "the distinction between organic and non-organic matter is dissolving in relationship to information," they conclude that "labor power must be treated in terms of an abstraction [that could accommodate] bodies that are beyond the [organic/nonorganic] distinction altogether."[37] This move to view the material structure of labor power as informational is critical. Indeed, it is information that gives the form—fills out the profiles—of the bodies we have potatoed thus far. Recalling that for Harvey, the commodity was never data, but always the labor power traded in data's production, and that for Berlant, individual sovereignty can't be recuperated under biopower, this move to make ourselves bigger, to "spread out" into "information-as-matter," or to include data in our own mattering makes sense if we are to set our "selves" aside, self-suspending to veer toward lateral agency.

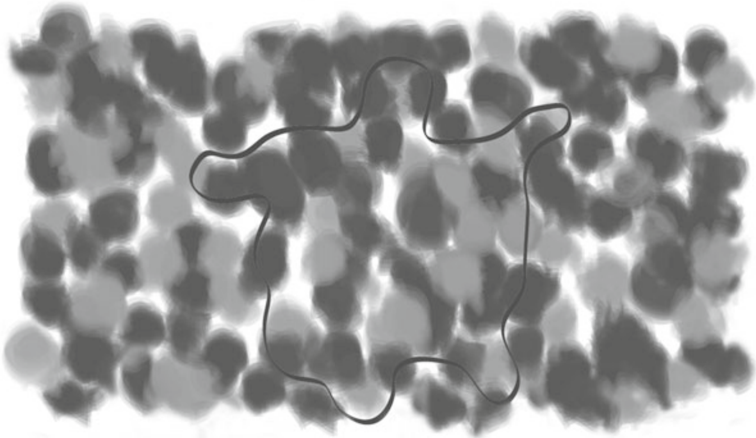
Yet, if for Clough et al. the question is whether labor power can be *in excess* of the body, I might phrase this differently: Can it *be excess body*? In other words, can labor power accrue in and as excessive bodies, obese bodies? Can labor power be fat? Clough et al. find a route into this strange transhuman matter through affect. I wonder if we can arrive at the same through bignesses, understood as both people and substance, as both big data (inorganic bodies-of-information) and big populations (obese bodies-as-organisms).

Clough's gross inclusions lend unexpected credence to the counterintuitive confusion between data as external object (product of labor) and data as included-in-subject (part of the laboring body). If affect is in matter, and an affective theory of value moves beyond the body-as-organism, we can reconsider that laboring body as including "connections between different levels of matter,"[38] including data. So the profile isn't personal. We don't produce self. We aren't who or what or how we think we are. We are, it seems, much bigger, more materially diverse, and crowd-like.

This leads us to the question of how a crowd-body that collects even-handedly such ontographic litanies as {self, multitude, and data} or {plastic, fat, and fact} or {points, lines, and planes} might function. In my reading, a collective body-of-obesity/body-of-information models object-oriented feminist transhumanism and embodies decelerationist aesthetics. A transhuman body is capable of lateral agency, also described by Berlant as "the forms of spreading pleasure... necessary to lubricate the body's movement through capitalized time's shortened circuit."[39] If such a quite-crowded body already consists in and troubles {labor, labor power, and commodity}, how else might it interface with capitalism? How might it deploy itself in relationships of power and pathos to "mov[e] through capitalized [time]"?







Bodies: "Big" Body politics

We have seen how, in the transition from point to line to plane, a body accrues information and substance and, at the same, paradoxically, becomes increasingly ill-defined. Points amass their individuality until a sense of self is lost. Lines stretch their contours until a profile is rendered indistinct. And planes sprawl until the organic and informational populations they support cross over to bear one another's resemblance. At each step we witness both accumulation (the rise of form) and ambiguity (the formlessness of form).

In an era of biopower, big data and obesity require intensive management. It is exactly this management that renders both irreparably vague. But rather than lament subjects' subsumption into something "bigger than you," I'd like to pursue, within this condition, a decelerationist form of object-oriented politics. If the tendency of "human actions and appetites" as "lines, planes, and bodies" is toward vagueness, that vagueness only awaits turning imperceptible.

If vague, a radical object-oriented feminist politics should not be expected to take the oppositional, demand-wielding forms with which we are most familiar. Just as object-oriented philosophy demotes the philosophical subject from its place of privilege, an object-oriented politics should look beyond the political subject and the dynamics of intersubjectivity that dominate political thought. One example of a political theory that accomplishes this is Elizabeth Grosz's "politics of imperceptibility."

In a critique of postcolonial feminist and antiracist politics of recognition, Grosz argues that they (as well as many political models typically cast as progressive) rely on a Hegelian model of intersubjectivity, in which the processes of recognition, identification, and subject formation are tightly intertwined.[40] It would not, I think, be stretching Grosz's point to say such politics are too subject-oriented. Rather than favor recognition and identification, which lead to the formation of *humanist* political subjects, Grosz turns to Nietzsche, whose nihilistic conception of forces leads her to an *inhuman* politics of imperceptibility, akin to what I have been calling vagueness. Drawing from Nietzsche, she writes, "Force needs to be understood in its full sub-human and super-human resonances: as [Lyotard's] *inhuman*... which both makes the human possible and which at the same time positions the human within a world where force works in spite of and around the human."[41]

Forgoing both recognition and identification, and forsaking the subject as political agent, Grosz's inhuman politics stands in contrast to most other feminist and antiracist strategies, including Judith Butler's post-Hegelian deconstruction of the subject, which remains, for Grosz, always humanist.[42] On this important point, Grosz writes: "Denaturalizing is important. But it is not my project. We have, by now, been denaturalized as much as we need to be. What I'm much more interested in [is a] sort of renaturalizing that has been taken away, redynamizing a sort of nature."[43]

The sense that we are already thoroughly deconstructed, and that this deconstruction has only facilitated our being reprocessed and rationalized, echoes the progressive complaint against neoliberalism, but through terms that will be more sympathetic to object-oriented thought, which itself has been accused of neoliberal leanings.[44] Construing the subject as deconstructed, lateral, multiple, rhizomatic, etc., has yet to liberate subjects, but in fact has anticipated changes in the shape of forces of oppression, which in turn differently construe themselves against those same subjects of revision. Perhaps surprisingly, object-oriented theories may be able to accommodate Grosz's alternative. For example, we might locate a gesture toward imperceptibility in Graham Harman's withdrawn objects' reserve of inaccessible excess that prevents their being exhausted in and by networks of relations. Indeed, for Levi Bryant, withdrawal makes Harman's philosophy a "powerful challenge to... 'identity philosophy'" and "to the theory of calculation and mastery upon which neoliberal ideology is founded."[45] By veering away from identity and capture, withdrawn objects elicit the impersonal and imperceptible.

In her essay "The Impersonal Is Political: Spinoza and a Feminist Politics of Imperceptibility," Hasana Sharp further connects the impersonal forces of Grosz with Spinoza. To Sharp's thinking, Spinoza "offers [Grosz] a rubric of analysis that denies the radical uniqueness of human being with respect to the rest of nature."[46] Sharp writes, "A Spinozan politics necessarily entails the collaboration of others, but it is important to consider those others to include more than human beings, and to consider the causes and effects of our collective interaction in excess of consciousness or intersubjectivity."[47] Like Clough's conception of affect-itself in excess of body-as-organism, Spinoza's politics is grounded in matter or substance, and suggests radical continuity between all forms of being.[48]

Sharp associates Spinoza's "hyper-rational" political thought with Grosz's call for "greater abstraction in feminist theory."[49] Indeed, both thinkers arrive at inhumanism through abstraction, a process by which political existence shifts from being explicit to being vague. Abstraction creates big bodies through the move toward imperceptibility that Sharp identifies with Spinoza's "polemic" of "getting over oneself."[50]

While we may be tempted to understand imperceptibility as a "micro" relation, passing "below the radar" of perception, in this political dimension it is in fact best understood quite differently. Bigness does not make one more visible and specific; such bigness would only amount to being more vulnerable to capture and accountability. Counterintuitively, becoming big makes one more imperceptible and generic; this abstract bigness thwarts systems of control with illegibility. Hence, imperceptibility is not about disappearing into something "bigger than you," but about becoming indistinguishable from that bigness. When it comes to self and other kinds of information, the inclusive abstraction that dilates data makes these differences imperceptible. It is about being bigger than oneself, oneself: like Norman Bombardini, both self and aggregate.

Indeed, if bigness first swells a figure into oafish obviousness, the gross stereotype of individual obesity, abstraction quickly causes it to outgrow the figure's specificity. Becoming *even* bigger blurs the figure into a generic ground that forestalls conscious focus and recedes from perception. Like Bombardini eating on the edge of an abstraction in which the singular self gives way to populations and substance, here the gesture of inscribing a profile makes an abstract mark, "incorporating" diverse points into the same body. It is as much as to say, *these things are the same thing*.

One: One Persists

Bigness is sameness. It is thermodynamic entropy played out to the end. As Spinoza writes, "Nature is always the same...."[51] With sameness, the imperceptibility advanced by a big body politics diverges from Grosz in a small but significant way. For Grosz, Nietzschean force is agonistic and fulfills itself in becoming.[52] Yet, this kind of dynamism feels alien to big being, which seems to need a decelerated form of force closer to mere, simple persistence. From point to line to plane to body, each aesthetic form we have considered has gradually expanded and gently decelerated expressions of self. So can we use this notion of deceleration to conceive a more lethargic politics?

For Spinoza, part of any being's essence is a power to act understood, as philosopher Steven Nadler explains, as a "power to persevere in being,"[53] which is to say, to hold an outline, to cohere in form, to persist. Much as Latour et al. advance persistence of form across gradual temporal change, Spinoza's term *conatus* describes this "kind of existential inertia."[54] Accordingly, political resistance in this model is not oppositional, not little, and not about action. For example, practices like sousveillance, in which small actors watch the big from below, are not what's at stake. Instead, a politics of imperceptibility mobilizes correspondences, vastness, and stasis.

In stasis, individual laborers cease to work and the commodity labor power ceases to function. Critics of object-oriented theory are mistaken to associate being an object with oppression. Not being an object, but being circulated as such in the generation of value, is what oppresses. And so deceleration grinds circulation to a near halt; bigness swallows value, the unevenness that is the motor of capitalism and exceptionalism; and labor power idles in a state of listlessness. When bigness can barely budge, exchangeability breaks down. The inertia of *conatus* sets in.

Here, a big body politics finds its ethics. Such slow bigness evokes the yogic principle of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence. In his commentary on "Book Two" of *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Sri Swami Satchidananda explains that *ahimsa* should not be understood as not acting violently, but as refraining from any harm, even so much as thinking harmful thoughts.[55] For Irina Aristarkhova, the practice of *ahimsa* in Jainism manifests the enlarged scope of transpecies feminist practices of care.[56] Care summons responsibility toward the otherwise-mattered populations and collective forms we have examined here.

Rubbing up close with otherness produces friction, like static electricity. Can we be static, nearly still? Bonded together in a static force field, difference generates dampened prickles of energy and even—persisting and tingling in stasis—awareness. *Ahimsa* stands aware as slow, considered mindfulness. This friction is no rapid, repellent antagonism—far from it. The extreme prudence in *ahimsa* requires a radical slowdown to a pace against which the momentum of reactivity no longer holds sway.

Ahimsa is an aspect of the first of the eight limbs of yoga, *yama*, which Satchidananda translates as "abstinence." Yama is the abstention from the very assertion of self, like Berlant's self-abeyance. Rather than acting with force or reacting to force, *yama* abstains from any agitations. So, too, the politics of decelerationist aesthetics slumps against connections and

correlations, along with the politics of recognition and even representation. In such a spirit, Laruelle's One summons radical inclusiveness in the manifold-turned-singular, evoking the "more" we associate with bigness (and the geometrical structure adopted here):

> The One is immanence (to) itself without constituting a point, a plane, without withdrawing or folding back upon itself. It is One-in-One, that which can only be found in the One, not with Being or the Other. It is a radical rather than an absolute immanence. The 'more' immanence is radical, the 'more' it is universal or gives-in-immanence philosophy itself (the World, etc.).[57]

In his hyperobjects, Timothy Morton bounces object-oriented thinking up a level to the vastness of ecological scale and geological time. Like geologic sediment, a big body politics is unconcerned with minutiae like mere human life, and the other bits, informational and otherwise, that compose it. Lethargically, separation converges in One. Things settle, and entropy overrides variation. Sharp apprises us that "[a] feminist politics of imperceptibility simply siphons enabling energy and power wherever it happens to find it."[58] Drawing a line through geologic time, a "slow death" of populations eases in, coming to embody a subtle standstill. "Inside this circle," Latour et al. explain, "everything might change through time.... What matters is that the change be gradual enough to preserve some continuity."[59]

Imperceptibly, all things persist, existing as a way of insisting, silently stating for the record that big being *is*.

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Notes

1. Object-oriented feminism (OOF) developed through panels I organized at the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts from 2010 to 2016. At the time of writing, OOF was a new field of analysis that evolved into *Object-Oriented Feminism* (see Behar 2016).
2. The term *accelerationism*, first coined by Benjamin Noys, was adopted by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams in their "Accelerationist Manifesto." For an anthology of accelerationist thought, including Srnicek and Williams's manifesto, see Mackay and Avanessian (2014). On aesthetics and accelerationism, see Shaviro (2015), see also Moreno (2013).
3. Quoted in Brown (2012).
4. This practice is not unique to digital data. For an account of postwar analog profiling, see Igo (2007).
5. For example, see The White House (2012).
6. Many examples can be found online, such as Do Not Track and TrackMeNot.
7. For example, see Tene and Polonetsky (2012), Wood (2012), and Wen (2012).
8. Harvey (2000, 107).
9. Ibid.
10. See The White House, "Consumer Data Privacy."
11. See United States Department of Labor website on "Occupational Safety and Health Administration."
12. Again, examples proliferate. See the tellingly titled "The Data Deluge," *Economist*, 2010; Roffman, "Data Deluge: The Problem is, You Can't Keep Everything," *Forbes*, 2012; and Bilton, "At Davos: Discussion of a Global Data Deluge," *New York Times*, 2012.
13. See Brown (2012).
14. Latour et al. (2012, 606).
15. Ibid., 598.
16. Bogost borrows *ontography* from Graham Harman, who discovered the term in a short story, "Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," by M. R. James. See Harman (2009), see also Bogost (2012, 38).
17. See Bogost (2012).
18. Ibid., 40.

19. Ibid., 38.
20. Latour et al. (2012, 607).
21. See Bogost (2012, 58).
22. See Berry (2012).
23. Latour et al. (2012, 599).
24. See Wallace (1987, 96–105).
25. See Berlant (2007, 754–780).
26. Ibid., 771–772.
27. Ibid., 757.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 763.
30. Bogost (2012, 59).
31. See Berlant (2007, 779).
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 763.
34. See Clough et al. (2007, 60–77).
35. Ibid., 62–63.
36. Ibid., 64.
37. Ibid., 62.
38. Ibid., 65.
39. Berlant (2007, 778).
40. Grosz (2002, 465).
41. Ibid., 467.
42. See Sharp (2009, 84–103).
43. Quoted in Ibid., 94.
44. See Galloway (2013).
45. See Bryant (2012).
46. See Sharp (2009, 92).
47. Ibid., 95.
48. For example, Spinoza's theory of "adequate knowledge" uses the radical, homogeneous continuity of substance as a way out of Cartesian correlationism (which makes this thinking especially suitable for an object-oriented feminist project). For Spinoza, mind and body are two expressions of the same substance. This continuity provides the "adequate knowledge" to know God.
49. See Sharp (2009, 97).
50. Ibid., 94.
51. See Nadler (2011).
52. See Grosz (2002, 466).
53. See Nadler (2011).
54. Ibid.
55. See Patanjali (2011, 125–126).
56. See Aristarkhova (2012, 636–650).

57. See Laruelle (1999, 141).
58. See Sharp (2009, 101).
59. See Latour et al. (2012, 610).

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Entr’acte 2

Maintenance Pornography

Antonia Hernández

Clean the room / check the internet connection / update the profile / remember the names of the fans / adjust the lighting / charge the sex-toys / check the make-up.

Maintenance Pornography is an art-based research project that explores work on the platform. Using a made-up dollhouse as an interface and stage, this performative investigation looks into domestic and repetitive actions on a sexcam platform, the not-so spectacular side of the networked self. Through a humorous yet critical play, this piece asks about social reproduction on the platform economy, the role of maintenance practices in the generation of value, and the incorporation of new technological infrastructures into daily life (Fig. 1).

By promoting online sexual performances, personal interactions, and monetary exchanges, sexcam platforms are machines of social reproduction: machines that exploit, accelerate, and capitalize on it. As expected, the main source of value is the broadcast of sexual performances in which performers compete creatively for the audience's attention. However, as

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Fig. 1 The dollhouse as a stage

this project explores, this extraction relies as well on practices of preservation and care: of the transmissions, the audience, and the infrastructure. *Maintenance Pornography* follows Mierle Ukeles' call for the recognition of maintenance practices in the art context: the recognition of those repetitive actions that sustain development, that concealed work that "allows for all other work."[1] In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, Ukeles defined two basic systems: maintenance and development. If development is all about innovation and creation, newness and constant change, maintenance is occupied with preserving and sustaining, renovation and repetition. Despite their invisibility, Ukeles asserts, maintenance practices are at the core of every activity (Fig. 2).

The dollhouse is here a figure and a research device, an expanded interface between the performers and me, a temporary place of reunion, and a common ground for their/our maintenance practices. As a stage, it allows the exploration of this shared networked domesticity: speculated yet inhabited by bodies, data, instances of software that get dusty. As in a feedback loop, the dollhouse holds the sexcam platform and broadcasts it into it. The dollhouse operates here on two levels: the room and the building complex. At the room level, I engage with miniaturized objects with my hands, too big for them. I clean up the kitchen, arrange the bed, mop the floor, and dance on a small chair. I broadcast my actions through the sexcam platform, sometimes receiving attention, sometimes

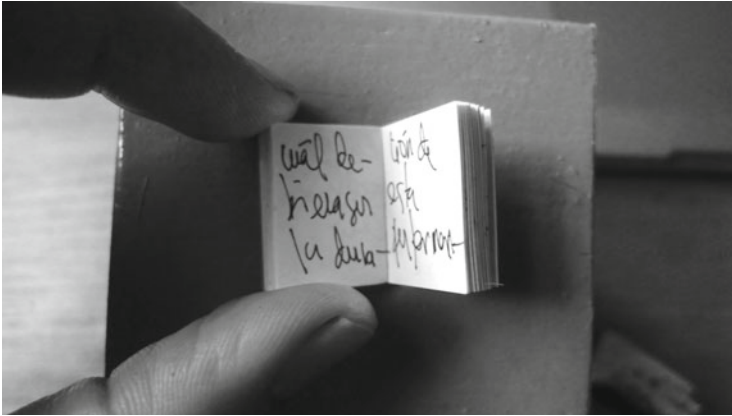

Fig. 2 Miniature book

not. When it happens, I have to take care of my audience. Talk to them through the chat, make jokes, write their names in a small notebook, and clean up more. I have to be creative—and I have to sustain and repeat that creativity. Develop and maintain, in a nutshell (Fig. 3).

Combined, the individual rooms create the building complex. Not only an aggregation of rooms but its regulations, infrastructure, discourses, allowed and prohibited activities, rent already due, desirable and undesirable neighbors. Unlike social housing, the tenure is unstable and the structure flexible. So flexible that if we get distracted (or not distracted enough), the ceiling will not protect us from the rain. To exist there is to be active—or to be replaced, like in a musical chairs game. In this building complex—the dollhouse at that level, the sexcam platform—you are allowed to stay, but you cannot sleep there. With a constant influx of young and naked bodies that smile to the camera from their rooms, this building complex is that "illuminated 24/7 world without shadows"[2] that never stops, never sleeps, and never disconnects. Sexcam performers compete for attention through gymnastic shows or by spinning luminescent hula-hoops. They have, however, to run less visible practices and take care of the lighting in the room, the frames per second of the transmissions, and their fan base. Performers should look authentic and spontaneous, but with regular schedules that recreate the platform again another day. These maintenance actions are hidden not only because they

Fig. 3 Miniature chair and table

Fig. 4 Writing on the miniature book at the miniature desk

are boring (they are) but because their visibility would reveal a secret: the work of the work, the fragility of the infrastructure, and the decay of the platform (Figs. 4 and 5).

Fig. 5 Performative investigation

Notes

1. Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. 2013. "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969! Proposal for and Exhibition, 'Care,'" in *Maintenance Required*, ed. Nina Horisaki-Christens et al. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.
2. Crary, Jonathan. 2014. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso.

Artist Abstract

Marguerite Kalhor

I began taking selfies to improve my portrait painting skills as a teenager, it was only their lingering social value that prompted me to continue taking them. As time passed, a multitude of social networks appeared—each with their own selfie-posting etiquette (this involved compositional styles coupled with a catchy, clever, or mundanely descriptive caption). I became interested in the tropes I found online: the Armchair Activist, Unwavering Conservative Uncle, the Sad Girl, to name a few. Thus began my practice of populating different social media platforms with half-truths, constructed identities and the most deceptively simple medium, the digital selfie.

I created a simple phrase generator in Processing using popular 2016–2017 Internet buzzwords in the United States. The phrases were acted out in selfies and collaged with free-use images in Illustrator and Photoshop to form *Post-Media Roleplay* (2017, digital collage), a series of PNG images. By simply giving these images titles and including symbols that associate slightly with them, one can create a story out of nothing quickly. The same can be said with posting and sharing content online, hence the

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Fig. 1 *Post-Media Roleplay Image 2*, 2017

mass-distribution and consumption of invented or fake news (Figs. 1 and 2).

Trollies (2016, digital collage), pairs a celebrity name with an "inspirational" quote embellished with pseudo-theoretical language superimposed over a rejected (not previously posted) selfie image. Celebrities have given the public access to their thoughts through fragmented tweets and Instagram posts and other users will often inflate these fragments, transforming them into profound statements and philosophies. Like *Post-Media Roleplay* there is a fabricated quality to these image macros. Within the images are three entities (the quote, the speaker, and the selfie), all constructed by a single person. These images transform the celebrity into a multi-faceted media organism (Figs. 3 and 4).

Cel Division (2017, video) is about an online profile, how it was born, its relationship to the user who created it, and what happened when its creator fled from the platform. The online entity is so one-dimensional—as most online profiles are—that it quickly goes from manically updated, customized, and loved to being abandoned by its creator and infected by spambots (Figs. 5 and 6).

Fig. 2 *Post-Media Roleplay Image 18*, 2017

Social media's power lies in unlimited access to infinite nodes of "now"—and are supported by deceptively *real* evidence like the selfie and the livestream. The selfie is the self-portrait's mass-media cousin whose hobby is selling t-shirts and digital subscriptions to the New York Times. Transposing a "true" self digitally is a science-fictive undertaking—but why would you want to, when you could be someone exciting?!

Fig. 3 *Apollonian*, JPEG, 2015

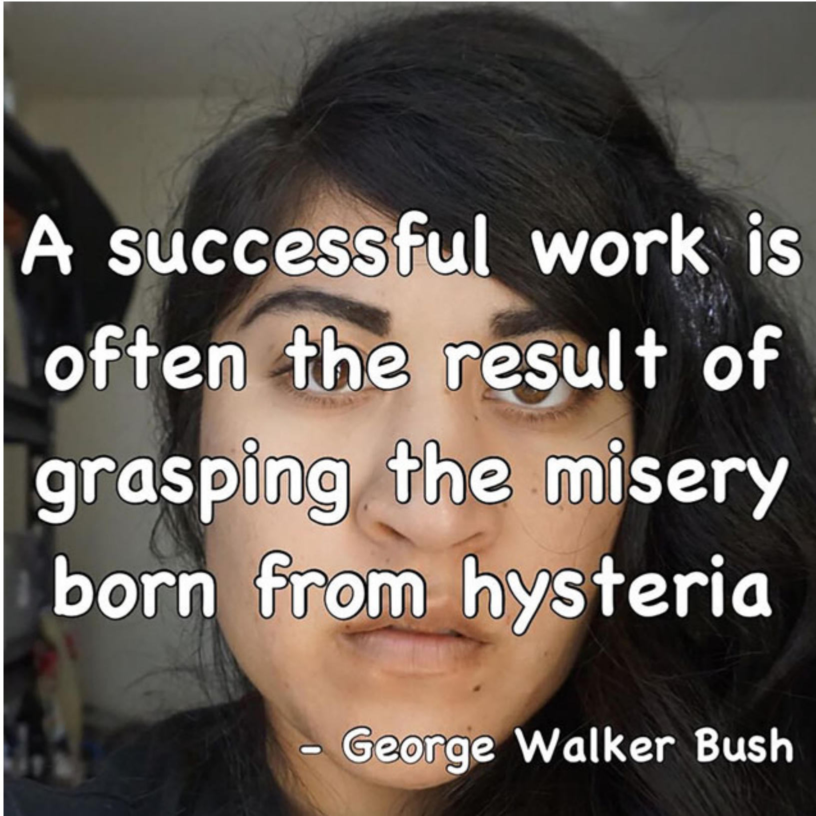

Fig. 4 *Hysteria*, JPEG, 2015

Fig. 5 *Cel Division*, Video still, 2017

Fig. 6 *Cel Division*, Video still, 2017

Aesthetics, Design and Visuality of the Self

“Hoax!” Palestinian Cameras, Israeli State Violence, and the “Fake News” Fantasy

Rebecca L. Stein

In 2008, in the West Bank village of Ni’ilin in the occupied Palestinian territories, a video of soldier violence was filmed by a Palestinian bystander.[1] At the time, Ni’ilin was actively involved in nonviolent demonstrations against the separation barrier and Israeli military reprisals were constant and fierce, including the use of considerable force in an attempt to quell these demonstrations and therein, the military hoped, dissuade local activists from continuing (Frykberg 2008).[2] The video in question documented the shooting of a Palestinian activist, Ashraf Abu Rahma, by an Israeli soldier during one such demonstration. The footage was captured by a Palestinian teenager, Salam Kanaan, a resident of the village, who filmed the incident on her rudimentary camcorder from the window of her family’s adjacent home (Scharlatt and Montell 2014). A copy of the original cassette would eventually be transferred to the Israeli human rights organization, B’Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), by an international activist.[3] After working through their standard verification protocols for videographic footage (Tchaikovsky 2010), B’Tselem filed a complaint with

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the Military Police, with demands that they open an investigation, and released the video to the Israeli media for publication.[4]

Within the right-wing Israeli political climate of that moment, amidst vanishing public appetite for discussion or images of the Israeli military occupation, the Ni'ilin protests and harsh army response had received little coverage in the Israeli media. But Salam's footage would captivate the Israeli public—a byproduct, in part, of the relative scarcity of video cameras and Palestinian testimonial footage of Israeli state and setter violence (YouTube was still its relative infancy as a video-sharing platform). What emerged was a nation-wide conversation about the incident, chiefly focused on the question of responsibility for the shooting.[5] Most of this conversation coalesced around the question of responsibility for the shooting: was the soldier responsible, or did responsibility fall to his commander who stood by during the incident? But there was a second Israeli storyline that also followed this viral video, and that was a story about fraudulence; namely, the charge that video was had been digitally altered to produce this damning image of the Israeli army.

The accusation took somewhat amorphous form in the early stages of this public conversation, focused chiefly on the proposition that the footage had been doctored in some way—the precise terms of the charge remained unclear—to produce the damning images. On television talk-shows, commentators addressed military suspicions about the "the element of video editing" (Dvory 2008). The timing of the footage transfer was also the subject of considerable suspicion (Dvory 2008), coupled with recurrent questions about the seconds following the shooting, when the camera was dropped in shock by the videographer, registering as a black spot on the video itself. "[W]hat happened in the second after the camera blacked out?" (Orbach 2008). The fraudulence accusation would also find its way into the military courtroom during the trial and sentencing of the soldier and officer involved, its grammar adjusted to meet the needs of the legal area, and would be supported by a minority decision from a judge.[6] The composite implicature of these lines of questioning—both in the court of public opinion and the legal arena—was clear, even if the details were vague or tenuous: something malevolent had happened behind the scenes to producing this ostensibly portrait of wanton Israeli military aggression and Palestinian injury.

This charge of fraudulence, that rhetorical staple in the age of Trump ("fake news!"), is at the core of this essay. What follows is an abbreviated study of the social life of this accusation as it circulated within mainstream

Israeli society during the first two decades of the twenty-first century—a charge that would be increasingly leveraged by right-wing Jewish Israeli publics, their international supporters, and Israeli state actors in their collective efforts to repudiate videographic evidence of Israeli state and settler violence against Palestinians.[7] The accusation operated much in the same way as it has in the Trump era: namely as a rhetorical tool designed to undercut critics and political dissent by impugning the authenticity of the incident or report in question. I am interested in the efforts of right-wing Israeli publics to repudiate or deny the growing visual and often viral archive of Israeli state violence, chiefly comprised of video filmed by Palestinian eye-witnesses in the West Bank.

In their writings on media history, Gitleman and Pingree encourage readers not to fall prey to the futurological readings of media that have predominated in the digital age, amidst a wave of scholarly attention to "new media" (a category, they propose, whose emphasis on novelty or newness obscures and elides as much as it makes visible). Rather, reminding readers that "all media was once new," they urge us not merely to take histories of media seriously, but to spend time with histories of media *emergence*. There is something particularly rich, they argue, in about studying media during "novelty years" when the functions and social meanings were still being established and negotiated, a period before the self-evidence of such technologies had yet been concretized: "There is a moment before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux…we might say that new media, when they first emerge, pass through a phase of identity crisis, a crisis precipitated at least by the uncertain status of the given medium in relation to established, known media and their functions" (Gitelman and Pingree 2003). These periods of media flux can generate optimism, where populations marvel in the wonder of the new media's supposed promise, but they also generate crisis, functioning as the staging ground for societal reckonings over the larger questions of the moment.

This essay follows their lead in studying a period of media emergence—in particular, a period that saw the rise and spread of digital photographic technologies, and networked platforms for image sharing. I am particularly interested in the forms of Israeli national crisis that such technological emergence generated: namely, the crisis associated with the growing volume of cameras in Palestinian hands and therein growing

videographic archive of Israeli state and settler violence, shot by Palestinian eye-witnesses living under occupation. The Israeli public had to response. The discourse of faking it was one solution.

Settlers and Smartphones

In Israel, as globally, the rise and spread of the fake-news charge was linked to two concurrent shifts in the social and political landscape: the rise and spread of mobile digital technologies and social media usage, on the one hand, and the rise of right-wing populism, on other. In 2008, at the time of the Ni'ilin shooting, digital tools and literacy were scarce within most Palestinian villages in the West Bank, particularly rural communities that lacked other basic infrastructural necessities.[8] In these years, few residents had their own photographic technologies; the primary eye-witness cameras available to these communities for testimonial purposes had been provided by Israeli or international NGOs in the form of the rudimentary camcorder (and one camera would be shared by many).

Much would, of course, change in a few short years—both in Palestine, and across the globe. By 2012, on the heels of the technological and political lessons learned from the Arab revolts of 2011 regarding the political power of mobile networked devices, cameras and social media literacy were beginning to proliferate within the Palestinian West Bank—albeit very unevenly. By 2014, almost all the actors in the political theater of military occupation were laboring to integrate cameras into their political work as both testimonial and documentary tools. This included Palestinian civilians and activists, the Israeli military, Israeli and international activists, and the Jewish settler population, their work enabled by a rabbinical ruling allowing photography on Shabbat. The military had long employed optical technologies of varying kinds within their arsenal as tools of surveillance. But in this period, the military also began to embed photographers into combat units, tasking them with improving the military's image (Stein 2017).

Such technological trends were heightened in Israel—this within a population that is famously celebrated for its digital literacy and its high-tech process. Israelis were early adopters of social media, and boasted very high penetration rates for mobile phones and later smartphones.[9] The story of Israel's remarkable techno-modernity, its rendering as StartUp

Nation, would be actively employed by the state in an effort to remake or "rebrand" its image (Senor and Singer 2011).

In this same period, the very years in which Israelis and Palestinians were becoming assimilated into the regime of the smartphone camera, the Israeli political landscape was changing. Israeli Jews were embracing forms of extreme and militant nationalism that had once been relegated to the nation's political margins (Beinin and Stein 2006). The Israeli settlement project was also being normalized during these years, increasingly enfolded into the Israeli mainstream, their agenda gradually gaining ground in the Israeli parliament. These years witnessed a substantive decline in Israeli investment in a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. The two-state solution—long deemed a non-starter by many Palestinians—was no longer on the political agenda of most Israelis. The Israeli left and activist community was growing smaller and more besieged, targeted as traitors and spies. The very language of the human rights claim—made by or on behalf of the occupied Palestinian population—was now thought to function, with the Jewish state and public installed as the injured party.

A tension lay at the intersection of these concurrent processes. On the one hand, there had never been more cameras in the occupation context, and never in more hands. The image of state violence had never been so visible; never by so many, for so many, and with such speed. Yet within Israel, there had never been less willingness to recognize and contend with the image of state violence against Palestinians. The fraudulence charge, which was growing in popularity among Israeli right-wing publics during this period, helped to manage the relationship between these fields.[10] That is, the discourse solved a problem: the problem of the growing visual archive of state violence, growing ever more viral on social media. The story of faking it worked to semiotically refigure this visual field, effectively vanishing the damning images and restoring the image of Israel. The accusation was marshaled as a political solution—a way to manage this ever-growing field of bad visuals (images that damage Israel) by bring them back in line with dominant Israeli ideology.

The Rise of the Hoax Charge: 2000–2014

The first collective mobilization of Israeli right-wing publics around videographic evidence of state violence began in earnest after the killing of twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Dura by the Israeli security services in

2000, in the early days of the second Palestinian uprising.[11] Images of his killing had been filmed by French television and would be replayed around the world in the aftermath of the event, becoming no less than a viral global icon of Israeli military. Mainstream Israeli publics and their international supporters read the event through a public relations lens (*hasbara*), with a focus on the global damage done to Israel's international image. What ensued was an organized campaign to debunk the images as fraudulent. An Israeli government committee of inquiry would be convened by Prime Minister Netanyahu in 2012 to investigate the incident and would eventually endorse their assessment, laying the blame on manipulative editing that had falsely produced this damning image of the Israeli state. The state committee did more than exonerate the Israeli security services in al-Dura's death; rather, they argued that he wasn't actually dead. Right-wing Israeli newspapers put it succinctly in their headlines: "Mohammed al-Dura: The Boy Who Wasn't Really Killed" (Caspit 2013). Pleas by the al-Dura family to exhume the boy's body would be declined.

Despite the al-Dura affair of 2000, the fraudulence charge would remain a minority claim in Israeli discourse through the next decade emanating largely from the conspiratorial pro-Israeli blogosphere. Much had changed by 2014 when two Palestinian youth were fatally shot by the Israeli security services in the Palestinian village of Bitunyia. The shootings were captured on video—which, by now, was a familiar occurrence in the occupation context. Yet what distinguished the episode was the sheer number of cameras on the scene and volume of resultant footage.[12] The scene had been filmed by numerous on-site cameras, including four security cameras and the cameras of a CNN and Palestinian photojournalist, respectively. The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem took on the case. It was almost an unprecedented case, their fieldworkers told me, because of the volume of corroborating visuals. Never had so many cameras been trained on the scene of a military shooting, never with so many discrete vantages—conclusively establishing military responsibility for the deaths. The military had already denied responsibility, claiming that their security forces had only used non-lethal rubber bullets that day, in compliance with regulations governing engagement in protest contexts.[13]

But Israeli's mainstream publics felt differently. For them, the volume of footage from Bitunyia did little to persuade them of military responsibility. To the contrary, the videographic evidence fueled a widespread

repudiation campaign. State actors and institutions were among the first to join the fake news chorus, including the Defense Minister, the Foreign Minister, and official military spokesmen (Khoury and Levinson 2014). All argued that "the film was edited and d[id] not reflect the reality of the day in question" (Staff 2014b). Their assertions were parroted by the national media, who insisted that it was "staged and faked" (Staff 2014b).

From there, the campaign was picked up by right-wing Israeli publics and their international supports. They did not dispute the deaths themselves, as they did in the al-Dura case. Instead, they focused on exonerating the IDF for the shootings through a close reading of the images, arguing that the bullets had come from somewhere else. In online forums, these scrupulous citizens employed their expertise to comb through the footage for signs of image manipulation. The evening news showcased forensic experts reviewing the clips—working slowly, frame by frame, to mount their suspicion charge (Staff 2014a). Many of those mounting the accusations would focus their suspicion on the footage of the falling body, arguing that "no real dying body falls that way." Others focused on what they claimed was the lack of adequate blood evident in the image, self-evident proof that the victim had not been killed. On the basis of the evidence, they proclaimed the images a hoax—yet another case of what some called "*Pallywood*," the Palestinian's Hollywood-like industry in manufactured footage of Israeli aggression.[14] This charge of fraudulence would also haunt the case as it wound its ways through the legal system. With the Bitunyia case, the fake news charge was established as a default Israeli script for responding to Palestinian videographic evidence of state violence.

Something dramatic had shifted between 2008 and 2014 where the fraudulence claim was concerned—a shift in both the scale of such repudiations, and their points of origin. In the 2008 case with which I began, this accusation of faking it emanated chiefly from the conspiratorial blogosphere, and from the mainstream media, but in a minor vein. By 2014, this discourse had migrated and grown, employed by many Israeli as an explanatory narrative where viral images of Palestinian injury and Israeli military violence were concerned. The repudiation news charge was not merely a national discourse but a script with its own governing grammar, its reigning modes of visual and forensic analysis; and all this had to be learned and iterated in order to function as a pedagogical project at the national scale. And by 2014, Jewish Israeli publics had learned it well. In the 2008 case with which I began, this accusation emanated chiefly

from the conspiratorial blogosphere. By 2014, this discourse was being embraced by many Jewish Israeli as an explanatory narrative where scenes of state violence on camera were concerned, including state officials. Now, no less than the Israeli Prime Minister would endorse this accusation as a way of explaining away Israeli military violence on video. In the course of this decade, Israelis had mastered the fine art of repudiation.

The Normalization of Media and Perpetration

In 2016, Palestinian Abed al-Sharif would be shot dead, at close range, by Israeli soldier Elor Azaria in the occupied Palestinian city of Khalil, Hebron, in the spring of 2016. The event would be filmed by multiple cameras—including by a Palestinian resident of the city from the balcony of his home. Sharif had attempted to stab an Israeli soldier and had already been shot and injured at the time of the killing, and was lying immobilized in the road. The Israeli human rights community would name this as an extrajudicial killing, an instance of excessive use of force by the Israeli military which, they argued, was becoming the rule in the context of the occupation. For their part, the Israeli military leadership would stress the aberrant nature of the crime, calling Azaria a "bad apple" and an exception from the moral code that guided soldiers.[15] But they supported the ensuing legal process, arguing that preservation of the military's ethical code depended on it.

But mainstream Israeli public felt otherwise. It was a landmark case in the history of the military occupation, many argued, for the ways it pitted the Jewish public against the military, that most sacred national institution. They stood by Azaria during the months and years of the trial that followed, which many would compare to the OJ Simpson case in terms of its status as a national media spectacle, supporting his right, and that of any soldier in the territories, to use violence and force against Palestinians with impunity. The footage of Azaria's extra-judicial killing would be committed to national memory, screened over and over again through the media, and would crystalize as a kind of national drama about Israel's existential battle. And in this crystallization, Azaria would figure not as perpetrator but as savior, hailed as a national hero in his unflagging defense of the Jewish people even in the face of probable military reprimand. Azaria would be convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 1.5 years in prison, extremely rare in the history of the occupation.[16]

Jewish publics would continue to support Azaria, greeting him as a homecoming hero when he left prison.[17] In months and years hence, his celebrity status would increase.

Missing from the public narrative around the Azaria case was the fraudulence accusation. The accusation would emerge in the first few days after the event's viral exposure, but would rapidly subside as Israeli publics gathered to celebrate their hero.[18] In this case, the image of a state killing was crucial to the narrative of national heroism in the face of the Arab terrorist threat.

How might this shift in national sensibilities be explained? Two answers are available—both technological and historic-political. First, we can return to Gitelman and Pingree. They write:

> [W]hen new media emerge in a society, their place is at first ill defined, and their ultimate meanings or functions are shaped over time by that society's existing habits of media use…The "crisis" of a new medium will be resolved when the perceptions of the medium, as well as its practical uses, are somehow adapted to existing categories of public understanding about what that medium does for whom and why. (Gitelman and Pingree 2003, xii)

As I have suggested, I offer this essay as an instance of what Gitelman and Pingree call the "crisis of a new medium"—a story, in this case, about Jewish Israeli society contending with the status of its military occupation at the dawn of the smartphone era, in the period of proliferating networked cameras among Palestinian populations living under occupation. The fraudulence narrative was employed to contend with this media emergence and the crisis it produced—that is, to manage the regime of the smartphone in its early years. Faking it stemmed the crisis by symbolically banishing this footage from the national stage. The repudiation discourse was a way to contend with the newfound hyper-visibility of Israeli state violence in the age of social media and mobile digital technologies.

But as the regime of the smartphone consolidated, new Israeli national tools and grammars began to emerge. That is, as media ecologies shifted and naturalized Israeli strategies for contending with mediated state violence would change. Banishing the image through a charge of fraudulence was no longer a viable option—at least, not as a dominant explanatory narrative, as it had been a decade prior.

Of course, the political landscape was also changing. The Israeli response to the Azaria killing was also a register of a Jewish Israeli population growing ever militant. Once, such images had to be wished away through the language of the fake; they had to be repudiated to be managed. Now, images of Israeli military perpetrators, of a state killing with impunity, could be embraced as heroic. The shifting terms of both the media and political climate made that possible.

Colonial Legacies

While the language of fake news proliferated in the Trump era, it was anything but new. Its Israeli variant can be traced to the onset of the Zionist settler-national project. As we know from postcolonial studies, the repudiation of indigenous claims (to history, land, humanity, etc.) was a foundational logic of colonial projects—namely, the charge that the indigenous claim was inauthentic or fabricated in some respect (Pratt 2007; Said 1979). Such alleged fraudulence set the stage for the colonial disregard of such claims, often violently so, with denial yielding elimination in its various forms (Wolfe 2006). This formulation was also at work in the history of Zionism and would have a lasting hold on dominant Israeli ideology in years hence. What we see in the Israeli case sketched briefly here, then, is the interplay between a form of repudiation with a very long colonial history, and a form of repudiation that is now tethered to the digital realm. The discourse of fake news bridged the divide between the longstanding colonial epistemology and the terms of the twenty-first century digital condition.

And it worked to solve a problem. That is, in the political context of Israel's occupation, the discourse rose to social prominence to solve the increasingly intractable political and media problem of more images of Israeli state violence than ever more—a larger volume, delivered with greater precision and greater speed. The language of faking it was a creative response to an increasingly intractable political problem: with greater numbers of mobile digital photographic technologies in Palestinian hands, there was a growing archive of Israeli state violence being captured and shared on social media—a larger volume of images than ever before, delivered with greater precision and greater speed. With the ascendance of nationalist extremism in Israel, the fraudulence charge grew ever-stronger among Jewish right-wing publics, a popular means of indicting critics and undercutting Palestinian claims, particularly where

Israel's military occupation is concerned. The charge of fakery was a way to manage this visual field, tempering their very ability to be seen as such. To say this differently: the flourishing of repudiation was made necessary by both the shifting media ecosystem, and by the political landscape, of the moment. And for a long time, it worked very effectively, working to symbolically refigure the viral visual field of threatening and injurious images.

For Israelis who supported the fake news accusation, the stakes were considerable—just as they have been in Trump's America by those who parrot this rhetoric. In the Israeli context, the discourse of fake news aimed to protect the image of Israel by stripping Palestinian victims and Israeli perpetrators from the videographic scene of the alleged crime—and to do so in a way that removed all traces of repressive Israeli military rule and its histories. The charge of fraudulence, forgery, or Palestinian theatrics ("Pallywood"), attempted to right the wrongs of a libelous Palestinian public intent on Israel's defamation by means of fictive incitement. Fake news was yet another tool in the Israeli struggle against the "existential threat." It worked to restore the image of the Israeli military as the most moral army. Or anyway, that was the operative political fantasy. The very future of the Jewish state was, they thought, at stake.

Notes

1. For a greater exploration of the themes in this essay, see Stein, 2021. The original video can be seen here, along with background on the incident compiled by B'Tselem. https://www.btselem.org/demonstrations/nilin.
2. Such protests were organized by the Ni'ilin Committee for Resisting the Separation Barrier.
3. I've written more about the organization elsewhere, including their camera testimonial project: Stein (2013, 2017, February 12, 2018).
4. Salam's family would suffer numerous reprisals from the Israeli security services as a result of this footage, including the arrest of family members, denial of work, and business permits. Interview Sarit Michaeli 2011. Also see Scharlatt and Montell (2014).
5. Because the versions varied, the court employed polygraphs for commander and soldier in an attempt to establish legal blame. This was framed by the Israeli media as a "war of versions." See Grinberg (2010).
6. For a study of the original decision of the Israel Military Advocate General (MAG) in this case, see Ben-Naftali and Zamir (2009).
7. This essay aims to dialogue with the growing interdisciplinary literature on the now-global discourse of fake news. See, for example Greenhouse

(2020), Kalpokas (2019), Mould (2018), Ward (2017). Accounts that have robustly attended to historical processes include: Aspray and William (2019), Hill (2018).
8. These decades saw the spread of mobile digital communications technologies across both Palestine and Israel, albeit in highly constrained ways for Palestinians living under occupation, their access stymied by military rule. See AbuShanab (December 2018), Tawil-Souri (2012).
9. The Israeli state had long lauded its per capita uptake of new mobile technologies (Cohen et al. 2008).
10. Adi Kuntsman and I discuss this in greater detail here (Kuntsman and Stein 2011, 2015).
11. For more detail, see Kuntsman and Stein (2015).
12. The video can be seen here, accompanied by background on the incident compiled by B'Tselem. https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20141112_bitunya_killings_investigation.
13. For more detail see Stein (2017).
14. On the legacy of this charge, see Eishton (2017).
15. For a study of the trial, and the legal culture of denial, see Diamond (2019).
16. Diamond (2019).
17. Konrad (2017).
18. Cohen (2016).

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Toward an Aesthetics by Algorithms—Palestinian Cyber and Digital Spaces at the Threshold of (In)visibility

Fabio Cristiano and Emilio Distretti

Introduction

In October 2017, the Israeli police arrested a Palestinian carpenter who posted online a selfie taken while working in a construction site in the illegal Jewish settlement of Beitar Ilit, near Jerusalem. The picture portrayed the man posing in front of a bulldozer and was accompanied by the caption 'Good Morning' in Arabic. Facebook's automated service mistakenly translated the man's message into 'attack them' in Hebrew, and 'hurt them' in English. Besides the wrong translation, Israeli algorithms ignited the security procedure also because they detected a bulldozer, which have in the past been used for hit-and-run attacks. Once notified of the post, the Judea and Samaria District police proceeded to

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the arrest, as no Arab-speaking officer had been involved in the operation and could promptly detect the fallacious translation.

Besides revealing the extent of algorithmic interference in Palestinian life, this anecdote reveals how algorithms are trained to learn, codify, manipulate, and make human behaviors visible, as well as tendencies, with the aim of transforming them into informed and targeted strategies of control. A common line of critique pointing at algorithmic surveillance is that these have made individuals hyper-visible to the eye of sovereign, and thus convey to invisibility—in the form of anonymity, 'masking,' or even disconnection—a transformative and empowering potential. This chapter expands the debate on visibility and algorithmic surveillance by addressing the question of colonial erasure and algorithmic power in the context of Israel/Palestine. It does so by drawing inspiration from Sari Hanafi´s definition of the erasure of Palestinian national space during and following the 1948 Nakba as spacio-cide. According to Hanafi, spacio-cide is not only a matter of seizure, control, or division of the Palestinian space per se, but its abolition. Accordingly, we argue that algorithms operate in occupied Palestine as tools of government that create an infrastructure of concealment, making the cyberspace as an additional layer of spacio-cide. By keeping the analysis within the aesthetic realm, we consider those liminal spaces generated by digital experiences where the threshold between visibility and invisibility gets thinner, and impacts the visibility of Palestinian cyber and digital spaces.

By addressing how algorithms and software contribute to make Palestinian digital spaces (in)visible, our analysis concentrates on the way this happens through the production of images and visual representations of space. Along these lines, this chapter argues that algorithms do not only last as ultimate expressions of colonial power through control and surveillance, but contribute to shape its very aesthetics. By acting as agents of order of Palestinian life, they give further configurations to its erasure from both real and digital worlds. At the threshold of visibility, algorithms thus inform an aesthetics of appearance and disappearance that operates by increasing Palestinian's visibility *to* the sovereign, while decreasing it from cyberspace.

Algorithms as Infrastructures of the (In)visible

(In)visibility traditionally connects to the global history of infrastructure, and its relation with power and the sovereign. In the history of modern state formation, for example, such relation has always been central to strategies of population management, and to the ways technologies could make citizens and subjects more visible, legible, and hence predictable. Overall, from the railways to communications and information technology, infrastructural power has always stood as a symbol of the human desire to make the world visible. In that sense, Orit Halpern suggests that the realm of the visible cannot be reduced to the sole sphere of the sensible, but it needs to be understood as an operation: the 'visible' constitutes in fact 'an assemblage of relationships, enunciations, epistemologies, and properties that render agents into objects of intervention for power.'[1]

In this framework, today's communication and information technologies have radically transformed the ways in which people are made 'visible,' as learning machines, algorithms, and software can shape, intercept, and even manipulate, social and political orders across the globe.[2] These are designed to accumulate large amounts of data that, once processed through mathematical calculation and averaging, synthesize human behaviors and patterns into aggregated and workable coordinates.[3] Precisely, this algorithmic modeling then rationalizes the collected data by producing an abstract and partial ordering of reality, producing systems of government that, in the long run, value and shape individuals' realities and consequently social order by increasing individualization, de-territorialization, while decreasing transparency and accountability.[4]

As different algorithmic models cross-integrate their data to produce individual or collective user profiles, they purport to reduce disordered and messy, yet plural, human experiences into a homogenous and systematized 'algorithmic life.'[5] Through mathematical ordering, in fact, algorithms operate on 'what has been done' but also towards unknown futures: as much as individual habits and inclinations crystallize into averaged mass ones, they create the possibility to track and influence historical futures and human actions. As a consequence of the 'datafication' of most facets of human experience, algorithms have become autonomous actors of power. In the sphere of social media, for instance, this has created a problematic imbalance between humans and machines: users' inability to decipher how algorithms work, and when/whether these are at work.

Due to their complexity—in adaptability, automatic functions, and extent of analyzed data—algorithms become increasingly undetectable and invisible to users. In contrast, this very sophistication makes users' behaviors, experiences, and inclinations inescapable to the sight of machines. Users unconsciously participate to algorithmic-based operations by feeding data to the machine, and hence becoming 'willing' targets of the algorithm. Such relationality in fact exists as the interactive production of machines' knowledge through encounters with human inputs. In such a way, users embed their experiences into circular models of algorithmic design.[6] In this scenario, the illusion for users to decide freely, ultimately strengthens the functioning of algorithmic-based power and ordering. Overall, by targeting the 'as-yet-unknown,' algorithms and software dig deeply into an underground world and, simultaneously selecting and singling out human inclinations, they operate at the threshold of the visible, the known, and the possible.

In this chapter we argue that such apparatus of producing evidence and ordering, if applied to the settler colonial context of Israel/Palestine, offers a further degree of analysis to understand that the relation between infrastructural power and invisibility is not limited to the question of control and government in terms of 'making visible,' but it expands to the question of colonial erasure. With the Nakba and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, 750,000 Palestinian refugees lost their homes and lands, while over 600 villages had been destroyed. Since then, the Israeli state has progressively implemented segregation and the systematic erasure (physical, social, political, and cultural) of Palestinians from their land. From the 1967 war, and the military occupation of the West Bank and the Golan Heights, through the First Intifada and the Oslo Accords in 1993, to the construction of the separation wall and the siege of the Gaza strip across the 2000s and until today, Israel has created a complex spatial and infrastructural grid made of refugee camps, borders, barriers, network of roads, checkpoints, military outposts and settlements that disarticulate, dispossess, occupy, and destroy the Palestinian living space. These are the elements that enforce Israel's settler colonial project and the invisibility of Palestinians.

In this context, we explore how algorithmic infrastructures set an additional layer of Israel system of power: juxtaposing to the physical world, cyber and digital spaces serve as the ultimate milieu where Palestinian life is forced into invisibility. Interestingly, this manifests in a twofold direction. On one hand, as the Israeli system of control, policing, and the

rhetoric of 'hunting terrorists' demands the hypervisibility of its targets, it also corresponds to the forced disappearance of resistant Palestinian user-ship from cyberspace through punishment or as a form of self-censorship to escape surveillance. On the other, symbols of the colonial apparatus and its dispossession (such as refugee camps, seams, and borders) are erased from digital maps and spatial representations, further stretching the history of the Nakba and its spacio-cide to cyber and digital spaces.[7]

The Hyper-Visible of Algorithmic Surveillance

As an infrastructure of visibility and control, surveillance represents a traditional feature of modern state formation.[8] Through algorithmic automation, strategies of control have further accelerated the transition towards what Gilles Deleuze defined, already in 1992, as the 'society of control'.[9] Scholarship on surveillance overall agrees that the emergence of the so-called 'dataveillance'[10] marked a discontinuity with the past by leveling the hierarchies of visibility, with all individuals subject to the eye of the machine regardless of their social status, race, gender, etc. At times where even the sovereign falls under the spotlight of surveillance, going invisible—through anonymity or disconnection—represents thus the ultimate resort to protect one's privacy.[11]

This acceleration is visible in Palestine more than anywhere else. If making Palestinian life hyper-visible through invasive surveillance dates back, and even precedes, the foundation of the State of Israel,[12] algorithmic surveillance enhanced this system of control and marked the final stage where Palestinian reality turns into a dystopia. Above all, the pervasiveness of the Israeli system of control depends on the total control on the infrastructure. In contravention of Oslo I (1993), which prescribes a progressive transition of the ICT governance to the PA, internet and service delivery infrastructures currently remain under full Israeli control for the entire territory—East Jerusalem, West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.[13] In addition to infrastructures, Israeli system of control operates at the level of information security: various national agencies, ISPs, social media platform, tech companies, algorithms, software, and even the Palestinian Authority (PA)[14] jointly police the visibility of Palestinians' contents. Before anything else, Israel's governance of the (in)visible operates through service denial, hence hindering the possibility for many Palestinians to even produce visual contents.

Besides being an effect of the violation of the Palestinian right to internet access, censorship primarily occurs through the Israeli policing of contents, justified on security grounds.[15] In the logic of predictive policing, which grounds its operationality on intelligence knowledge and predictions, Israeli authorities developed algorithms and software specifically tasked with the scanning of Palestinian online activities. These algorithms lack transparency and are thus not available for scrutiny.[16] Investigative research and media reports point however to some of their features. Israeli algorithmic surveillance scans social media contents—texts (statuses, notes, and comments), videos, and images—in search for data constituting an 'incitement to violence.' Filtering a number of coded Arabic words—such as 'martyr,' 'Al-Aqsa,' 'jihad,' 'knife,' and more—algorithms collect and combine data about individuals in order to predict their propensity to commit a violent crime (as in the case of the above-mentioned bulldozer selfie). This dystopian functioning of information security led to the arrest of more than five hundred Palestinians since 2017.[17]

In 2015, Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour wrote and published the poem 'Resist my people, resist them' (*Qawem Ya Shaabi Qawemahum*). Shared on her Facebook profile page—as well as through a YouTube video combining the poem text with short video-cuts of Palestinians clashing with the IDF in the West Bank—the poem was eventually flagged by Special Units of the IDF. As a result, Tatour's house was stormed by the Israeli police, who arrested and charged her with incitement to violence and terrorism against the State of Israel. She was imprisoned for 97 days, before being released on house arrest in January 2016. In 2019, after three and half years of persecutions, the district court in Nazareth accepted her appeal and acquitted her from all the charges related to the publication of the poem. Clearly, her initial punishment was commensurate to her decision—as happens to many Palestinians—to make her voice visible, denouncing the violence and injustice of the Israeli oppression. Like her, many other men and women have been detained because of contents shared on social media or instant messaging apps, that were indiscriminately flagged as 'dangerous imminent threat.' Palestinian human and digital rights organizations (such as 7amleh and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights) have been reporting how Israeli algorithms filter contents—such as journal articles, and political statements—that criticize Israeli occupation without any

direct reference to violence.[18] There, algorithms work as online checkpoints, filtering contents and reporting them to authorities in the event these are perceived as worth of attention.

As if we were trapped in the imagination of a sci-fi novelist, algorithms are designed to make contents and identities visible to the sovereign. Being visible online comes with greater risks for Palestinians. Cyberspace can quickly turn into an unsafe space, that strangely mimics the prison space: prisoner in fact cannot speak, write, and share. Not surprisingly, digital rights activists and dissidents in Palestine more and more imitating the techniques that political prisoners use with encoded messages to communicate internally and externally to the prison—to stay visible, to exist.

Furthermore, with Israeli algorithms set on a high-level guard, too often Palestinians are pushed into self-censorship—to disconnect—this way contributing to the representation of a digital space polished off their presence. Too often, however, disconnecting is not enough for protection. In order to profile users, algorithmic surveillance feeds on data of different nature and sourcing/confidentiality. In 2014, for instance, forty-three agents of the Israeli intelligence (part of the elite Unit 8200) undisclosed evidence revealing the Unit's reliance on invasive spyware and hacking to acquire private data of Palestinian users.[19] Targeting and blackmailing particularly vulnerable categories—such as women or LGBT people—the Unit trades the secrecy of their personal data in exchange for information of relevance for the intelligence, in a sort of state-sponsored phishing. In this sense, the aesthetic intervention does not only remove Palestinian contents, but intimidate most vulnerable categories pushing them into self-censorship and disappearance.

The Palestinian case thus shows how algorithms are not just repressive in the way they intercept and censor (or lead to self-censorship). In the context of social media, they influence likeability or, on the contrary, they can function as vectors of hate and discrimination. At the same time, as proven by the case of Dareen Tatour, the technique of making Palestinians hyper-visible on the internet has revealed to be a double-edge sword for the state of Israel. In denunciation of Tatour's case, the Israeli minister of culture Miri Regev re-posted Tatour's poem in order to expose her publicly to the web. Regev meant to stir hatred, and to make Tatour a target: interestingly, this had somehow an opposite effect, as it only led to the poem gaining more notoriety and popularity, creating the basis for

new transnational networks of solidarity for Dareen. By doing so, this visibility eventually put the Israeli state under the spotlight, stirring attention around other similar cases where freedoms of artists and poets are under attack across the globe.[20]

Interlude—Toward an Aesthetics by Algorithms

The unravelling of tensions and fluctuations between visible and invisible raises questions that, going beyond surveillance and coloniality, relate to representation and political aesthetics. By operating at the limit of the visible, algorithms set in fact the ground for an aesthetics of (in)visibility. Through the systematization of this visible, we argue that their systemic ordering subtends an aesthetic 'of the limit,' that we here define as an *aesthetics by algorithms*.

Programmers have since long tried to define and capture the 'beauty' of algorithms in aesthetic canons. In terms of compactness, eloquence, and 'cleanness,' these aesthetic qualities are deemed to be crucial for the ordering and problem-solving functions of algorithms. Art theory and criticism has similarly explored the relationship between algorithms and aesthetics in order to formalize systems and viewpoints.[21] This chapter shifts perspective from the orderly qualities *of* algorithms to the aesthetics ordering performed *by* algorithms. In Israel/Palestine an aesthetics by algorithms is set by making Palestinians hyper-visible targets of surveillance and control.

Resistance against this oppressive algorithmic power similarly operates through (in)visibility. Through different techniques, activists similarly make themselves invisible, as the only mean to escape repression and control. Hence, both state data visualizations and dissident speech and practice engages with those representational elements that define an aesthetics by algorithms. Overall, it becomes clear how the epistemic function of algorithms determines generally an understanding of reality that reflects how knowledge opaquely can mutate into operationalizable outputs. In this light, to speak of an aesthetics by algorithms means speaking of an aesthetics of opacity, in which both power and counter-powers are deeply immersed.

Opacity constitues indeed a foundational principle of the aesthetics by algorithms. This automated aesthetics unfolds and expands on multiple levels, by determining various conventions and canons. Here we list a series of principles that in our view set the foundational aspects of the

aesthetics by algorithms: (1) algorithms and software act at the threshold of (in)visibility; (2) in so doing, their growing autonomy corresponds to a lower degree of detectability; (3) the opacity of mechanic and interactive learning serves and perpetrates the bias and partiality of sovereign power; (4) while operating as agents of order, classification, and prediction, algorithms validate decentralization in power structures, moving at the edges of transparency[22]; (5) entangled in algorithms' inner tension between opacity and ordering, algorithms and software can emerge as semi-independent actors[23]; and (6) algorithms interchangeably make their targets or subjects of interest visible or invisible.

Around those principles, we argue that it is possible to theorize the basis of an aesthetics by algorithms as an order of the (in)visible. There, designers, lawmakers, military, algorithms, self-learning algorithms, users, and dissidents (and many other actors) play—more or less directly—a crucial role. Grounded on such vast network of actors, an aesthetics by algorithms serves an important epistemic function: by operating at the intersection between digital and real worlds, it explains the relation between aesthetics and politics. In line with the thought of Jacques Rancière, the aesthetics by algorithms does not correspond to the aestheticization of politics. Instead, it constitutes canons or a 'system of a priori forms' that determines a 'delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.'[24] In this sense, it pertains to the very foundation of politics, and as Rancière explains, as something that equally and necessarily 'revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.'[25]

The Invisible of Colonial algorithms

Whereas Israeli algorithmic surveillance primarily operates by making Palestinians hyper-visible, the ultimate goal of this colonial system of control is annihilation, deletion, and disappearance. With social media platforms emerging as most important spatial containers of individuals' visual contents—texts, audios, videos, and more—their absence, removal, or disappearance also pertain to the visual representation of these spaces and to the conveyed aesthetic experiences. From this perspective, Israel's strategy of governing the visible encompasses the policing and censorship of contents on social media platforms. Therefore, Israel' attempt of

making Palestinians visible and legible online, is a way to make them vulnerable. By juxtaposing the digital to the physical space, algorithmic power in fact epitomizes a very typical colonial paradox: the colonized is simultaneously 'annihilated' and 'preserved,' as he/she is instrumental to keep intact the social, economic, and racial hierarchy imposed by colonizers and settlers.[26]

In addition to online policing and censoring through information security (and the reaction/resistance to it), another opeational aspect of an aesthetic by algorithms is grounded on data visualization. As Wendy Chun has explained, algorithms are designed to make the complexities of the global world mappable, transforming 'time-based interactions and intervals' into spatial networks and visual representations.[27] In this sense, these representational pursuits create an 'illustration' that conflates the local and global dimensions through the reduction of the world into digital nodes and edges. These representational elements provide us with the possibility to think of an aesthetics by algorithms in terms of 'maps' or 'atlases' of such networks, where the visual and aesthetic components of algorithmic power are multiple and polymorphous.

In their book *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison highlight how those XVI century atlases of science, geography, anatomy, or astronomy, were designed to map the territory of the power they served. Similarly, algorithms embody a dictionary of the science of the visible, whose masters learn to 'see' the world in new ways. Compared to those atlases, the big data revolution offers a broader dimension to the birdeye culture where 'seeing from the air' interconnects to horizontality, allowing for a better comprehension/capture of the world's constitutive objects. There, the space of play of algorithms illustrates nodes and edges that do not simply create a network, but make politics, where things, people, or experiences are deliberately made visible or invisible, nonexistent and despised. This visualization aspect, constitutes indeed another milestone of an aesthetics by algorithms. According to Halpern, in fact, 'visualization came to define bringing that which is not already present into sight': visualizations, according to current definition, make new relationships appear and produce new objects and spaces for action and speculation.[28] Specific to the context of Israel/Palestine, it is important to note that 'map-making practices were always entangled with contradictory spatial identities and imbalanced power resources.'[29]

In that sense, making the Palestinian (in)visible was not only a question of ordering and control, but also one of legitimization of the Zionist

project and state formation. As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, since 1948 and the Nakba (which starts with the expulsion of Palestinian from their lands and the erasure of more than 600 villages), Israeli power has been systematically entangled to mapping as a form of spacio-cide.[30] After 1967, Israel made the occupation increasingly invisible, trying to normalize its sovereignty in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.[31] This strategy of erasure concerns different domains and practices, such as cartographic renaming, removal, and place-making. While the West Bank became 'Judea and Samaria' on Israeli official maps (thus drawing a connection between the state of Israel and biblical times), the Green Line (1967 armistice line) progressively disappeared from visual representations in a way that 'reif[ied] the erasure of borders (…) between Israel's territory and the regions it had captured.'[32] Between 1967 and the First Intifada (1987–1993), the Israeli government favored illegal settlements construction, as it 'served, among other things, to erase the Green Line in the [settlers'] own minds as well as in the minds of the citizens within Israel.' Questions of borders reappeared in Israeli public discourse in the aftermath of the Second Intifada (2000–2005) in times when the construction of the separation wall—85% of which runs east of the Green Line in Palestinian territory—and digital mapping developed contiguously. Despite a number of exceptions,[33] the digitalization of maps occurred in line with the Israeli cartographic tradition of keeping the Green Line and many spatial products of the occupation (the separation wall, refugee camps, checkpoints, etc.) invisible.

Alongside the opening of mapping to a wider usership, algorithms and software failed to put existing power structures into question through a disruptive 'aesthetic intervention.' Rather they continue to retrace and to amplify its patterns and logics. Since the earliest stages of its implementation, Google Maps (GM) has generated a number of controversies regarding its (non) representation of the physical and political realities of Palestine. At a first glance, the absence from GM of any of the conventional nomenclatures (Palestine, State of Palestine, Palestinian Territory, etc.), immediately signals erasure.[34] Besides sparkling protests, this 'forgetfulness' led to the 2013 DNS hack conducted by five Palestinian hackers who re-directed Google's Palestinian homepage (www.google.ps) to a site displaying a correct version of the map. Protests furthered in 2016 when the labels West Bank and Gaza Strip suddenly disappeared on GM. Regarding this incident, a Google's spokeswoman swiftly attributed the removal to a bug in the software's algorithm, hence

putting the lack of accountability and opacity of the algorithms to an instrumental end. When zooming in the map, another act of erasure reveals: several Palestinian villages in the Area C of the West Bank, as well as Naqab desert non-recognized Bedouin villages, are absent. At the same time, GM reports in full detail the network of illegal Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, hence normalizing their presence also in digital representations.

With regards to digital representations of Palestinian spaces, augmented reality (AR) video-gaming corroborates the argument presented in this chapter. As soon as Pokémon Go—the popular augmented reality's mobile game—was released and made available in Israel/Palestine, it became immediately clear how the images of the game embodied the detachment between real and virtual in its spatial representation.[35] The application of augmented reality (AR) technologies to gaming purports in fact to create playable experiences at the intersection of real and virtual worlds. Adding a virtual layer onto the actual world enables experiences that exceed the boundaries of both worlds through the creation of hyper-realities. Yet, the integration of different worlds becomes problematic when spaces, politics, and histories are assembled and reproduced in rarified ways, in contrast to the complexities on the ground. In a context like Palestine, overlaying a virtual world over a divided space can lead to further contestation.

In line with the tradition of those maps and cartography keeping the Green Line invisible from Israel's visual representations, the AR map not only erases the Green Line, but it also makes spatial and symbolic products of colonial oppression disappear. Abstracting space into generic emptiness and void, PG provides players with a depopulated and neutralized image of East Jerusalem and of the Palestinian territory, emptied of the images of the Nakba and the 1967 occupation. Refugee camps, together with the separation wall, borders, and other spatial components of the Israeli occupation are made simply invisible. This way, by erasing the visual tropes of Israeli infrastructural power, PG embodies the operational as well as symbolic/aesthetic features of the colonial status quo, thus further stretching Hanafi's argument spacio-cide to virtual/augmented reality. Not as negation of the physical, rather as its completion, AR intervenes aesthetically by offering a digital representation of Palestinian land that deliberately cancels the spatial products of the Nakba and the occupation (in addition to military, civil, and judicial powers).

Making Palestine invisible in cyber and digital spaces not only constitute a representational issue related to place-making and the visualization of spacio-cide. Serving as referential input for the software's calculation of routes and navigation advice, this removal also impacts users experience in terms of mobility. For example, the absence of Palestine in GM means that its algorithms are unable to calculate routes between Palestinian villages, in the West Bank and from/to East Jerusalem. In those cases where data are available—such as for the route between Ramallah and Bethlehem—GM algorithms advise users to pass through East Jerusalem. As most Palestinian residents are denied access to their capital since 2000, the software does not only make Palestine substantially invisible but, by ignoring Israeli-imposed restrictions, excludes large sections of Palestinian usership from the service.[36] In other words, following an exclusionary logic, GM algorithms assume that users are not Palestinians, making them invisible once again. Whenever navigating through Palestinian areas of the West Bank, a warning indicates that roads have a 'restricted usage,' while no such security alert appears in proximity of Israeli checkpoints or settlements.[37] In fact, settlers can plan their journey from one illegal settlement to the other, indicating preferential, fast, and secure routes for their travel.

Whereas the epistemic function of GM rests on a very limited interaction between users and software, other digital services draw their maps and routes through the acquisition of extensive user data.[38] For this very feature, the Israeli-developed navigation app Waze praises itself for allowing users to participate in the making of maps, navigation, and ultimately space.[39] One of Waze's distinctive features consists in generating navigation guidance on the basis of drivers' crowdsourced information, also in real time. Most distinctively, Waze algorithms fulfill their epistemic function in two different ways. First, besides traditional turn-by-turn voice navigation, real-time info on traffic, or location-specific alerts, they acquire anonymized information regarding users' behaviors, such as speed averages and driving habits. Second, users contribute to expanding the database by reporting map errors, temporary disruptions (such as accidents, roadblocks, etc.), and other feedbacks related to their driving experience. But, a user knowledge-based functioning, can cause unpredictable and controversial outcomes that can shake the status quo, becoming an issue for the Israeli authority.

In 2015, during the so-called Intifada Al Quds, Waze suddenly came to be at the center of the Israeli public debate. The software application wrongfully featured certain areas of East Jerusalem (Silwan and Wadi

Al Joz) as Areas A or B of the West Bank, and thus advised Israeli drivers not to access these 'danger zones.'[40] The Israeli mayor's vigorous protests promptly addressed Waze's CEO with the claim that these areas stand within Jerusalem municipal boundaries, and thus under full Israeli control. Further sparkling Israeli criticism, in 2016 Waze algorithms erroneously advised a military vehicle of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to access the Qalandiah refugee camp, situated between Jerusalem and Ramallah.[41] The use of heavy force and destruction from the Israeli army to rescue the soldiers caused the murder of one Palestinian. Following the event, IDF officials criticized Waze and its software for changing 'facts on the ground' and putting the life of Israelis at risk. In order to address these representational loopholes, Israeli military accompanied Waze's representatives for a field tour across the West Bank in 2017. This cooperation instantly generated an immediate map update: since then, Waze does not indicate any route to those travelers that intend to drive into the Palestinian territory. Ruling out that users might be in fact Palestinians wanting to travel across the West Bank, Waze unilaterally embeds its navigation directions to the strategy of Israel's military needs, exercising a sort of technological redlining that de facto excludes Palestinians. When drivers now approach any 'confusing' point close to Palestinian controlled Area A, the navigation software issues a generic warning indicating the proximity of a dangerous area: 'Can't find a way there' or 'Caution: This destination is in a high risk area or is prohibited to Israelis by law.'[42]

When algorithms seldom unstitch networks of power through knowledge acquired autonomously, sovereign power intervenes to stitch them back. In recent years, Palestinians have stood up against their disappearance and developed alternative navigation services, such as Maps.me and Doroob Navigator. These services do not only help Palestinian drivers to deal with the ever-changing rules, checkpoint traffic, or to avoid Israeli settlements. By doing so, they address outstanding epistemic questions of visual justice, where Palestinian mobility and trajectories are visible, and the spatial products of Israeli occupation are also kept visible—against the attempted normalization of oppression in the app-worlds.

Epilogue—In Defense of Visibility

The systematic control of cyber and digital spaces through algorithms is not unique to Palestine. Since social media has become a new space for data collection and mapping, information security has become crucial to

state-controlled apparatuses of surveillance worldwide. Overall, with the eye of surveillance becoming seemingly unescapable, activists and critical scholarship have increasingly embraced practices and discourses of 'disconnection' on the belief that invisibility produces empowerment.[43]

This chapter has shown how disconnection and invisibility are problematic strategies in those colonial contexts where invisibility is the ultimate goal of the sovereign. In Israel/Palestine, algorithms and software operate in a context where different layers of power overlap, juxtapose, and interconnects. Our analysis primarily reveals how this contextual complexity affect algorithms' epistemic operations in ways that advance the Israel's government of the (in)visible through erasure, silencing, and bias. On one hand, this evidence strongly puts into question those tenets that strongly emphasize the emancipatory potential of technology, both in academia as well as across digital rights' advocacy. On the other hand, algorithms' autonomy—intrinsic to their epistemic function—also reveals software's ability to put power structures into question. In this sense, their political agency mainly unfolds through the tension between the ordering and disordering of networks.

The Palestinian case also points at a number of considerations related to the complex relationship between aesthetics, politics, and technology. While digital maps reveal how, through visual representations, people's political life is affected, the censoring and erasure of contents indicate the way in which the very interruption of political life also depends on questions of aesthetics and visual representations. Studying the digital nodes and edges of an aesthetics by algorithms, implies understanding the many ways in which algorithmic power through digital images, visualization and their ordering strengthens (or constructs) oppressive realities and injustice through the visualization and ordering of digital 'images.' For this reason, the aesthetics by algorithms approach allows to register this tension in relation to geopolitical transformations, historical change, or the absence/neutralization of both. In line with Rancière theorizing, our aesthetics by algorithms indicates that—in contrast with those governance trends that purports to depoliticize users' life through technology—visual representations nevertheless unmask 'the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art.'[44] From this perspective, visibility shall be valued and protected against the threat of disappearance.

Notes

1. Halpern (2014, 144).
2. Chun (2016).
3. Just and Latzer (2017).
4. Just and Latzer (2017, 21).
5. Amoore and Piotukh (2015).
6. Beer (2016).
7. Hanafi (2012).
8. Giddens (1987).
9. Deleuze (1992).
10. Van Dijck (2014).
11. Garfinkel (2000).
12. Friedman (2019).
13. Arafeh et. al. (2015).
14. Along the same lines, the PA's legislation, such as the recently approved law on cybercrime, further narrows and deteriorates the already limited privacy rights and political freedoms that Palestinians enjoy online because of the Israeli occupation.
15. Cristiano (2019).
16. On the concept of algorithmic transparency: Ananny and Crawford (2018).
17. AbuShanab (2018).
18. 7amleh (2018).
19. Derfner (2014).
20. Distretti (2019).
21. Gips (1975), Stiny (1975).
22. Bevir (2011).
23. Beranger (2018).
24. Rancière (2004, 13).
25. Ibid.
26. Janmohamed (1983), Ahluwalia (2001).
27. Chun (2016).
28. Halpern (2014, 21).
29. Bittner Jiří, Peter Wonka and Michael Wimmer (2001).
30. The Six-Day War terminated with Israel's seizure of East Jerusalem and West Bank from Jordan; Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt; and Golan Heights from Syria.
31. Israel adopted a resolution (B/9 Marking of Country's Borders) replacing the 1949 Armistice Line on official maps with the Israeli army's line of deployment at the end of the war (including the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank).
32. Gordon (2008).

33. Different groups and projects focus on producing alternative maps. Among these, MA'AN Development Center, B'tselem, and Visualizing Palestine designed maps and infographics not only making Palestine visible again, but also including data about the economic and social impacts of the occupation. iNakba is a trilingual mobile app (Arabic, Hebrew, and English) based on GPS Navigation technology. This app allows users to locate and learn about Palestinian localities destroyed during, and as a result of, the Nakba since 1948. The recently released Doroob app provides navigation service for overlooked regions across the MENA region. Allowing extensive users' interaction with software, Doroob has been praised for constituting a 'fair' version of Waze.
34. In accordance with resolutions of various bodies of the United Nations, its General Assembly, and Security Council, accepted nomenclatures for the area are State of Palestine, Palestine, Palestinian Territory(-ies), or Occupied Palestinian Territory(-ies).
35. Cristiano and Distretti (2017).
36. Since 2000, the Israeli construction of the separation wall and annexation of East Jerusalem illegally cut off Palestinian residents of the West Bank from accessing the city without a permit. The Israeli permits regime—for work, study, health assistance, or even accessing one's land—constitutes an additional layer of the occupation's governance.
37. Israeli legislations forbid access to Area A (full PA's control) for Israeli citizens. They are granted full mobility in Area C and on all routes connecting settlements to each other or to Israel. Anan AbuShanab, 'Connection Interrupted: Israel's Control of the Palestinian ICT Infrastructure and Its Impact on Digital Rights', 7amleh—The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media (December 2018).
38. 7amleh has published (2018, 16) an infographic comparing the different mapping services. Cfr. 7amleh—Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, 'Mapping Segregation—Google Maps and the Human Rights of Palestinians' (September 2018).
39. In June 2013, Google acquired the totality of Waze's shares for over $1 billion, making it the first Israeli start-up to reach such high market value. Noam Bardin, Waze's CEO, published on LinkedIn an interesting inside perspective on the deal, where he compares Waze to a unicorn. Accessible here: https://kutt.it/QzbXos.
40. As for the 1993 Oslo agreements, these areas define those territories located in the West Bank under the (partial) Palestinian Authority's security and civil control: Area A (full Palestinian Authority's control), Area B (Palestinian civil control and joint Israeli-Palestinian security control).
41. Located within Area C and East Jerusalem, near the main checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem and next to the West Bank Barrier. The construction and expansion of 'K'QAalandia Checkpoint and the West

Bank Barrier in the early 2000s have significantly affected the economic situation in the camp by isolating it from the Israeli job market and Jerusalem.

42. These spots include the entrances to Nablus and Jenin, the Qalandiyah area, the parts of Gush Etzion bloc, near the towns of Sair and Beit Fajar, and the Tul Karm region.
43. Karppi (2018).
44. Rancière (2004, 14).

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Perspectives Collectives of the Shared Self

Natalie Bookchin

The following is an edited version of an artist talk I gave in Rome at the Selfie conference in May 2017.

The following is a reflection on a decade-long body of artwork that I began in 2008 and completed in 2017. The work, a series of videos and video installations, considers the intimate ways in which people interact and come to depend on Internet communication technology and tools. It explores the impact of these tools, first developed by the U.S. military and later expanded and commercialized by Silicon Valley, on our social spaces, our identities, and our changing understandings of public and private. It grapples with questions of what was—and still is—at stake as the ground began to fall beneath the feet of the middle class and the poor, as secure jobs, safety nets, and public space began disappearing, and as inequality increased and political divides deepened, all of which took place alongside the development and growth of the Internet and so called "social media."

The works in the series are built from archives that I collected, or in one case made, of first-person videos where people present themselves in front of webcams, sharing opinions, feelings, attitudes, and

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gestures, ranting, confessing, and confiding before their online audiences. Although the first-person video genre was not invented with the Internet, since the portable video camera entered the market in the 1960s and entered the consumer market with the camcorder in the 1980s, people have been pointing the camera at themselves and recording.[1] As networked devices with their built-in cameras became even more portable, cheaper, and ubiquitous, the form became one of the primary ways for ordinary people to be seen and heard in public, recording videos of themselves and sharing them on the internet. What I thought was new, strange, and particular to the explosion of this genre was how it seemed to reflect a new way that people had begun interacting with and interpreting the world. They would position themselves in front of their networked cameras and document themselves describing and reacting to the world, sometimes mimicking pop stars and newscasters, reacting to and interpreting current events that they saw or heard in the news, and sharing intimate details and reflections on their personal lives. Publicly with strangers on the internet. The resulting videos were both inward- and outward-looking, performances of selves that were self-conscious and scripted but also spontaneous and casual, self-portraits made to be shared with the world. They often were deeply intimate, made in the privacy of people's homes, and at the same time, because of their availability on the internet, strikingly public. I was struck by the extent to which people turned to—and trusted—the Internet. They seemed to be turning to the internet as a way to find human connection, a social life, and a public. It was a way to try to be seen and heard by others, in public, at a time when many people felt unseen.

To make the work, I began searching for and downloading videos found on YouTube, editing and organizing them into archives arranged by themes and subject matter. In my searches, I tried to go beyond the algorithmic results served up by search engines, digging deep into search results, coming up with as many variations of search terms that I could think of, and repeating the searches multiple times on different days. I developed a form for editing and montaging the archived fragments, cutting the videos into small fragments and placing them side by side on a screen, in order to reveal commonalities among the videos, including shared language, similar attitudes, and gestures. The resulting montages reflected the torrent of feelings, attitudes, opinions, and expressions of self that had begun flooding and ricocheting across the Internet, where each video was a part of a nearly endless chain of other videos, each responding

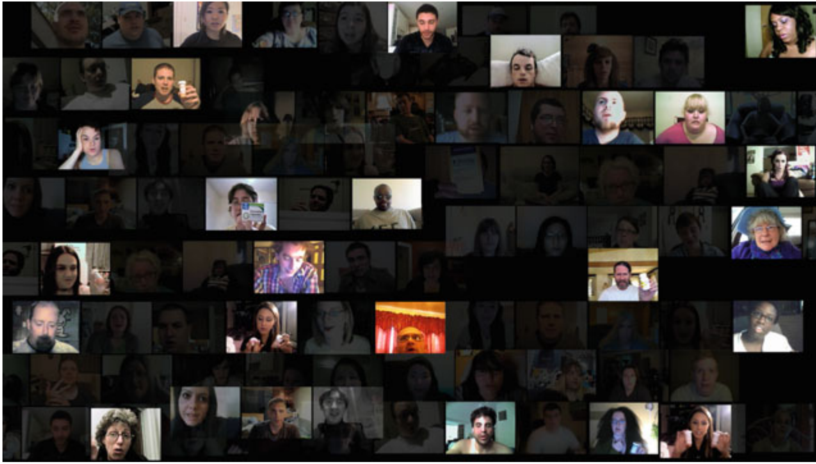

Fig. 1 *My Meds*, from the *Testament* series, Natalie Bookchin (2009a)

to, reacting to, or mimicking what came before, and affecting those that would follow. Talking heads and gesturing or moving bodies would fade in and out in choral-like formation, with voices overlapping, appearing to speak in unison, echoing others, completing others' sentences, with bodies moving in sync or in sequence. The installations I built from these montaged videos offer collective self-portraits of a changing society. They reflect both on individual and collective identities, shaped by the formal, technical, and ideological constraints of the newly developing social media where the videos circulated. I think of them as akin to a musical compositions, with orchestras of harmonic or dissonant melodies of the contemporary shared self (Fig. 1).

I began this work during the global financial crisis in 2008, the year Barack Obama was elected, and completed the last piece in the series shortly after Donald Trump became president,[2] in 2017. The work spans the rise of social media from its early days of techno-utopianism, when social media was heralded by pundits and the popular media as ushering in global democracy—think of the optimism, in 2011 among politicians and internet boosters in the West about the Arab Spring[3]—to its current degraded state,[4] now generally associated with the global spread of right-wing authoritarianism, conspiracy theories,[5] misinformation,[6] and with threats to democracy.[7]

My early pieces, such as the video installations, Mass Ornament[8] and My Meds,[9] from the series Testament,[10] both completed in 2009, document a more innocent time on the Internet. Vlogs and other first-person videos, which I archived as source material, were often raw and spontaneous. People appeared unguarded, displaying a vulnerability and directness that today feels almost shocking and certainly anachronistic. The iPhone, with its built-in camera and easy network access, had just been released in 2007, and people were connecting to the Internet primarily from desktop and laptop computers anchored by cables and cords. As a result, the videos inadvertently document not just people alone in their rooms, but also their spaces and the things they surrounded themselves with, in kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms where they kept their computers. I loved these details, and sought them out. I also paid attention to the particular ways that each person would sit silently in front of their webcam, or welcome and speak directly to their future viewers, treating their future anonymous viewers as welcome guests into their home, and as if what was being offered was good company. Back then, the Internet was still largely perceived as a safe place for free expression, where people would display vulnerability and freely speak their minds. Perhaps many were still unaware of the online culture of trolling, which would later follow in attacks and slurs in the comment section of their videos, especially in those by women and people of color. Over time, as Google continued to find more and more effective ways to monetize its platform, these spontaneous, casually made, amateur videos would largely be replaced by Pro-Youtubers with commercial sponsorship and a large viewer base.[11]

Ultimately, the series depicts the paradoxes of the Internet's communication technology and the commercial platforms we use, and that use us. On social media like YouTube, individuality and competition among "users" are designed in the platform. On YouTube, "Broadcast Yourself" used to be YouTube's slogan; each user has their own channel, their own subscribers, and their own algorithmically determined playlist of suggested videos to view. The montages I created, with their multiple, separate video clips, each framing a single person, mirrors the ways YouTube and other social media platforms formally and ideologically individuate separate selves. At the same time, the montages—and the series overall—attempts to show cracks within this regime, and to hint at other possibilities. They depict assembled bodies and voices of the vulnerable and precarious as an emergent collectivist public, with shared impulses

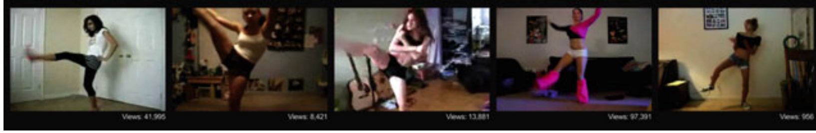

Fig. 2 *Mass Ornament*, Natalie Bookchin (2009b)

and desires. They make visible imminent or potential social formations that might, even momentarily, resist or exceed capitalist capture. Judith Butler, in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* writes, "What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away? Such an impasse can become the paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity both mournful and joyful."[12]

The first work I'll discuss is *Mass Ornament*, the earliest work in the series. The title comes from an essay written in 1927 by the German cultural critic Zigfried Kracauer.[13] In the essay, Kracauer analyzes the Tiller Girls, a popular dance troupe from the early twentieth century, as the aesthetic embodiment of Fordism, the system of mass production under industrial capitalism. The Tiller Girls, arranged by height and weight, would dance in rows with linked arms and identical outfits, performing simultaneous tap and kick dance moves. Their bodies seemed to merge into one, producing abstract forms and shapes that they themselves could not see. Kracauer noted that their bodies in formation resembled rows of factory workers on assembly lines. The workers and the dancers' bodies were fragmented, reduced to the repetitive movements of limbs. Just as the dancers could not access the abstract visual forms their collective bodies produced, workers in factories couldn't access the abstract capital their collective labor produced. Kracauer suggested that people were drawn to the mass ornaments produced by dancers like the Tiller Girls because these images unconsciously reflected back to people the harsh social and economic conditions under which they were living. They were, like the dancers, alienated from the fruits of their labor (Fig. 2).[14]

With *Mass Ornament*, I wanted to explore how our new online entertainment and aesthetic forms reflected current social and economic forms and conditions. Using an archive of amateur videos of people dancing alone in their rooms, I created a mass dance, editing fragments of clips

together so that the dancers appear to move in sync. I created a push–pull—a tension between the isolation of each dancer alone in their room and a depiction of their collective moves and activities. The depiction of collectivity is reinforced with a music track, drawn from samples from two films from the 1930 depicting masses of synchronized bodies: "Lullaby of Broadway", from Busby Berkley's famous tap-dancing sequence in the *Gold Diggers of 1935*,[15] filmed during the Great Depression; and marching music from Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*,[16] which documents the Nazi's massive 1934 Nuremberg Rally. The soundtrack for *Mass Ornament* also includes ambient sounds I of different room locations, from urban to rural, and the sounds of individual bodies moving in different spaces, thumping, shuffling, breathing. I wanted this sound to call attention to the presence of fleshy, living bodies, and to emphasize the specificity of different people, each in their own remote locations. I included the view count from the time I downloaded the video, reminding viewers of the archive and of the platform itself, where the supposed success of a video is measured by view counts, and where video producers compete for views.

Following Kracauer, I thought of the mass dance I created as the aesthetic embodiment of a Post-Fordist, or neoliberal, condition. Unlike the Tiller Girls and the factory workers described by Kracauer, the YouTube dancers work from home. They are self-managed and self-directed. The separation between work and leisure is fuzzy. Although the dancers share their work for free, their videos are monetized by Google. The dances are primarily based on popular culture scripts, with people imitating or dancing to their favorite pop song, but the movements feel spontaneous and unpolished, and people seem at ease in their bodies, many of which don't conform to normative ideals of beauty and fitness. At times dancers seem to push against the edges of frames, as if they were trying to break out of the individual boxes in which they are encased, and join with their fellow dancers (Fig. 3).

If *Mass Ornament* is reminiscent of a chorus line, the next work I will discuss, *Testament*, recalls a Greek chorus. A common device in ancient Greek theater, a circle of non-professional actors enlisted from the community surrounded the main actors who performed as kings and gods. The chorus danced and chattered to the audience, acting as an intermediary and offering commentary on the actions of the kings and gods, sometimes speaking, singing, or dancing in unison. I thought of the chatter in the vlogs that people shared online as representing a similar

Fig. 3 Mass Ornament 2009, Natalie Bookchin

phenomenon—ordinary people responding to and commenting on the actions of those with greater power. Their rants, reactions, and confessions seemed to come from a place of disempowerment, less actors than "reactors". Mining stockpiles of vlogs shared online, I assembled them to create percussive voicings of the self, of mass intimacy, and fragility.

I typically exhibit *Testament* as a series of large projections, with multiple channels of audio, allowing listeners to distinguish between many single voices while also hearing the choruses speaking in unison. But as with much of my work, I don't only show *Testament* in art spaces, but also keep it online—on YouTube[17] and Vimeo[18]—so it can live and travel in the spaces where the material was first collected. *Testament* has four chapters: *Laid Off*, which depicts individual and collective anguish as a variety of people narrate their experiences of losing their jobs; *My Meds*, a choral recitation of psychotropic medications; *I am not*, where vloggers passionately proclaim or deny their non-normative gender identities; and *Count*. *Count* is different from the others. Instead of multiple clips on a single screen, one clip follows another, each showing a single person speaking a single number, often with great enthusiasm or with sighs of disappointment. The clips are edited so speakers appear to count backwards from around 300 to 105. In watching *Count,* viewers are at first uncertain why people are declaring numbers, but as they watch, they begin to match numbers to bodies, and eventually realize subjects are stating their body weights (Fig. 4).

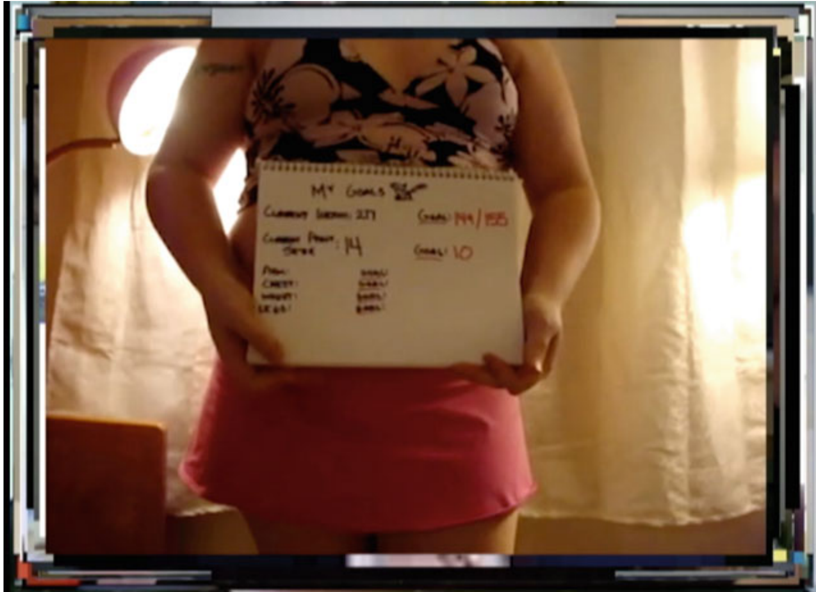

Fig. 4 Count from *Testament* 2008/2017, Natalie Bookchin

Although I began *Count* in 2008, I held off from completing it until 2017. I had initially worried that, because of how stigmatized being overweight is, viewers might judge the speakers. When I finally returned to the work, I reedited it, lingering longer on each speaker before and after they declared their weight to emphasize the emotional investment and vulnerability of the speakers, who, had left behind on the internet a sensitive, self-portrait that revealed the troubled relationships with bodies that goes well beyond the individual dieters. I was thinking too about how, on social media, raw emotion and personal revelations are transformed into digits and data, which are then ingested by algorithms, and monetized by corporations.[19] As people share what is typically called their "weight journey" online, they are asking that they be held accountable for their bodies, while their personal accounts add to the (bank) accounts of the platforms that host them.

Now he's out in public and everyone can see[20] is an 18-channel video installation I completed in 2012. The narrative is composed of fragments of vlogs in which people recount and reenact media scandals, rumors, and

conspiracy theories involving four famous African American men, each of whom achieved great success in spaces historically dominated by white men. In the narrative, I weave together numerous vloggers' descriptions of and takes on the various scandals, removing the names of the men so that the scandals bleed into one another. What remains is an impassioned collective performance of and struggle against white supremacy, with repeating tropes and patterns of speech organized around themes of race, gender, and celebrity. Scripts, handed down from the mass media, are rehearsed and refracted across racial, class, and gender lines, while shared language—variously angry, racist, ignorant, judgmental, philosophical, adversarial, and insightful—cuts across the different scandals. As words and talking points repeat, the interchangeability of the tropes reveals the relentless racism and resistance to racism that make up American public life.

In the installation, monitors are installed at varying heights around a room, immersing viewers in a cacophonous space. Voices, faces, and opinions ricochet around the room as the different monitors light up. The room fills up with speakers, who, from the seeming safety and isolation of their own rooms, appear together, forming waves and eruptions of impassioned, ironic, and angry judgments and emotions. Speakers linger, taking drags of cigarettes, sipping from beer cans or wine glasses, adjusting their props, and appear to gaze directly at viewers as they speak their minds. Sometimes the room feels crowded and filled with chatter, while at other times it goes dark and quiet. In *Now he's out in public*, viewers feel like they are in the room, face to face, with strangers. This experience—coming faces to face with the internet's self-appointed judges—contrasts with the anonymity of interacting with social media platforms like Twitter, where people—or bots—are represented only by a user handle, and a small image.

Viewers in the installation as they walk around the space, become a part of the production, acting as detectives, shifting their gaze and bodies as they chase the story around the room. They search for clues to identify the man in question, and recognize—or not—the news story, scandal, or allegation. The full story is never revealed; it is always partial and without resolution, waiting to be completed by the audience. While the narrative explores how bodies are racialized, threatened, and violated in (white) public spaces, the installation takes the virtual space of the internet and makes it visceral and material, tactile and embodied. It feels almost as if

one's body is transported into a physical manifestation of the internet, that troubled and troubling agora.

The vlogs I sourced for *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* were all made between 2008 and 2011, during the first term of Obama's presidency, which was from 2008 to 2012. At first, this period seemed to signal improved race relations in the United States, but too soon it was clear that it had given way to a resurgent racism. This white backlash was driven in part by perceived loss of power, which coincided with the rise of social media, creating a poisonous brew. The result would be a mainstreaming of racist speech and actions, especially online, reaching its height (one hopes) in Donald Trump's America. The summer before Trump was elected, in 2016, the work seemed worth returning to, and I decided to remake the installation as a film. The physical experience of the installation was hard to translate into photos and videos, and its themes were newly resonant, anticipating the political crisis we face today. Also resonant were its other themes: the personalization of the news, the substitution of opinions for facts, monologues replacing dialogue, and the fracturing of truth and the viral circulation of rumors and conspiracies theories online, where bigoted and thoughtful views appear equivalent and undifferentiated.

After making *Now he's out in public*, with its focus on the self-appointed judges and opinion-makers, I needed an antidote, and decided to turn to a group of people whose voices and experiences were largely absent online. In the 24 or so years since the internet went public, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened and deepened. Even while social media has been sold as giving many a voice, it has also produced a class of the over-visible and a class of unseen. Poverty, both the experience of it and the stigma it carries, often isolates people and disconnect them from the rest of society. Many facing poverty have neither the time, the means, or social networks necessary to do the work of maintaining an online presence. In *Long Story Short*,[21] a 45-minute film I completed in 2016, I decided to appropriate the tools and aesthetics of social media—the webcam, the direct address, the first-person narrative—to make visible perspectives and the faces often ignored or stereotyped in the media. While poverty is typically discussed in the media at a remove (when it is discussed at all), I wanted those experiencing poverty to be the subjects rather than objects of analysis. I spent over a year making repeat visits to homeless shelters, food banks, and adult literacy programs in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area in California, the two places I was living

at the time. I invited anyone who wanted to participate to share their experiences and to tell others—the middle class, the wealthy, people like me—what we got wrong and what we needed to know. I interviewed over 100 people, each interview lasting around an hour or so.

Poverty is classic terrain for documentary films, but the approach in mainstream films tends to be surprisingly uniform, often focusing on one or a few individual stories and charismatic characters who speak for the many. The risk of this approach is inadvertently reproducing the common but mistaken idea that poverty is an individual, rather than a social, experience. This can lead to blaming the individual for their impoverishment, just as the few who release themselves from its grip are celebrated. In *Long Story Short*, instead of focusing on individuals, and selecting one or a few charismatic characters, film depicts many. The film's subjects speak for themselves, both as charismatic individuals as so many of them were and are, but also, through an edited assembly, as part of a constructed collective. Working from a large archive of first-person videos, I edited them to reveal both the singular and collective experience of poverty, showing patterns and commonalities among the many, without losing site of singular experiences and challenges. My aim was to represent poverty as a social and iterative condition. Seen together, *Long Story Short* offers a vision of potential solidarity of the group, an imminent collective of strangers, yet to materialize.

The end of this body of work coincided with the end of an era. By 2017, after repeated revelations of data breaches, bias in algorithms, and political crises prompted by the U.S. Presidential elections[22] and Brexit,[23] Silicon Valley finally fell from grace.[24] In my latest artwork, instead of focusing on instances of imminent or potential collectivity and intersubjectivity in videos made by single people alone in their rooms, I have begun exploring already existing social bonds, collective actions, and alliances. In *the act of changing something's position* I reanimate an archive of hundreds of videos of uprisings shared and circulated on the internet. The slow-moving, looped projection depicts movement in one place as a performance of staying put, "standing ground", and occupying space, even when in our current reality, the state demands dispersal and disappearance. Protesters enact and reenact black-led resilience and resistance in the face of chronic systemic violence against Black people. I situate this work between the still and the moving image, thinking back to radical photomontage of the 1920s as well as to the future, between the streets and the Internet. The montages present a fantastic,

Fig. 5 *The act of changing something's position* 2020, Natalie Bookchin

optimistic space filled with colors, handmade signs, megaphones, gestures, and bodies, depicting people together, performing and enacting resistance (Fig. 5).

In a second project, I am making a film with the working title *Sonidos Negros* (Black Sounds) in collaboration with a Roma association in Spain, Lacho Bají, and a Spanish artist collective, LaFundició. We are developing a collective cinematic portrait of and with the local Spanish Roma community, exploring modes of representation of and by a people long stigmatized and discriminated against by the majority white Spanish society. Although Roma history has long been repressed by the Spanish majority, local Roma groups are actively reconstructing their hidden pasts in Catalonia and their deep roots in Spain. The film will offer a radical pastiche that utilizes visual aesthetics inspired in part by social media feeds. In contrast to stereotypes about "gypsies" as primitive and pre-modern, this aesthetic counters mainstream and stereotypical depictions of the Roma as anti-modern and underdeveloped, out of touch with current trends, technologies, and realities. Many use Facebook and WhatsApp groups to share and discuss instances of "anti-gypsyism" and pro-Roma material. They are looking not to create a new community, but rather to strengthen existing bonds and distribute content that is not currently available in the media. We're also exploring how the Spanish Roma's

vital community life and economies of sharing offers radical alternatives to hyper-individualism and neo-liberalism. Amidst the rise of right-wing radicalism across the globe, both these projects aim to focus attention on the value of maintaining, caring for, and growing existing progressive alliances. While the story of the internet is increasingly one of big tech and authoritarianism, visions of people sustaining and strengthening community, maintaining hope, and building resistance, are needed now more than ever.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the first-person video in early video art: Krauss (1976).
2. Donald Trump became President of the United States on December 19, 2016.
3. See for example: Shirky (2011). See also, Josh Halliday, "Hillary Clinton Adviser Compares Internet to Che Guevara." *The Guardian*. Accessible here: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jun/22/hillary-clinton-adviser-alec-ross (July 2011).
4. There have been numerous articles since 2016 about the threat of social media and the Internet on democracy. See for example Andrew Marantz, "The Dark Side of Techno-Utopianism." *The New Yorker*. Accessible here: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/30/the-dark-side-of-techno-utopianism (September 2019) and Julian King, "Democracy Is Under Threat from the Malicious Use of Technology: The EU Is Fighting Back." *The Guardian*. Accessible here: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/28/democracy-threatened-malicious-technology-eu-fighting-back (July 2018).
5. Bernstein (2017).
6. Roose (2019).
7. Lawtoo (2019).
8. Bookchin (2009b). Accessible here: https://vimeo.com/5403546.
9. Bookchin (2009a). Accessible here: https://vimeo.com/19588547.
10. See description of Testament. Accessible here: https://bookchin.net/projects/testament.
11. Since Google bought YouTube in 2006, it had been working to develop ways to monetize the site and profit off of the billions of amateur videos it hosted, first by offering to "partner" with video makers who would run ads on their sites, and later, by encouraging producers to turn "pro", and finally by limiting who could profit off the site to large scale producers. See Rory Maher, "YouTube Gives Video Producers a New Way to Make Money." *Business Insider*. Accessible here: https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-introduces-adsense-like-features-to-promoted-video-cam

paigns-2009-8 (August 2009). See also Michael Grothaus, "YouTube Just Made It Harder for Small Video Producers To Make Money." *Fast Company*. Accessible here: https://www.fastcompany.com/40517572/youtube-just-made-it-harder-for-small-video-producers-to-make-money (January 2018) and Julia Alexander, "The Golden Age of Youtube Is Over." *The Verve*. Accessible here: https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/5/18287318/youtube-logan-paul-pewdiepie-demonetization-adpocalypse-premium-influencers-creators (April 2019).
12. Butler (2018, 23).
13. Kracauer and Levin (1995).
14. Kracauer and Levin (1995, 78).
15. Busby Berkeley (1935).
16. Wind and Wagner (1936).
17. Testament on YouTube. Accessible here: My Meds: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzFhEdht5bo, Laid Off, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoWzWrsugdY, I am not: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G78sFBPU_4.
18. Testament Chapters 1–3 on Vimeo. Accessible here: https://vimeo.com/265980408.
19. For an example of how this business model works see Lois Beckett, "Yes, Companies Are Harvesting—And Selling—Your Facebook Profile." *ProPublica*. Accessible here: https://www.propublica.org/article/yes-companies-are-harvesting-and-selling-your-social-media-profiles (November 2012).
20. See description of *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*. Accessible here: https://bookchin.net/projects/now-hes-out-in-public-and-everyone-can-see/.
21. Bookchin (2016).
22. Read (November 2016).
23. Hänska and Bauchowitz (2017).
24. Persily and McClatchy (2017).

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Selfies as Augmentation of (Disappearing) Reality

Ana Peraica

Besides self-portraits, the back or selfie camera serves for viewing the part of the world which is usually visually inaccessible to us. Mobile phones are—aside for photographing—used as devices for visually controlling the world we do not see immediately; the world behind our backs. This is the case at least during the moments of making the visual composition of the photograph. I will name the part of our surrounding physical reality behind one's back the "backworld," which overlaps with the translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Hinterwelten* (Ger. Hinterworlds or the back-worlds, which are more related to *backwardness*).[1] According to my use, the backworld will be simply a space not primarily covered by a naked, natural vision, as it falls behind the back of the viewer. It would be a precondition of the front-world, both as a conscious construction of the world, but also unconsciously, fearing any surprises that might come out of it.

There is not much being written on that part of the world that constantly stays behind our immediate vision field, and in this chapter I will connect these rare sources in order to interpret rising problematics of mediation of whatever is behind us physically, that has now become an

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integral part of our visual culture. Attached to the present-in-front part of the world, the *backworld* has been the subject of multiple myths dealing with the relationship between the subconscious and the conscious since the very beginning of Western, ocularcentric culture. It is, as for example, present in the contrast between the narrowed view field of Narcissus and the 360° auditive immersion of Echo. It is also clearly present in the problematic uncertainty of Orpheus, who turns his head back so to control the world of death as well as in the more rational, mediated perception of Perseus. In this text, I trace lines of interpretation from the myths present in the selfie genre, speaking to fears of the world behind our backs to those present in selfies recording death, and those engendered by the rational augmentation of surrounding physical reality in the backworld, as permitted by the use of the mobile phone. I would like to trace them back to the original concepts of the world behind the back as the world of death itself, that is: the world from which Orpheus tries to rescue Eurydice and the world that maintains its killing gaze, as in the myth of Perseus, who controls the gorgon Medusa.

Dangerous Crabwalks

In the summer of 2019, authorities at the Plitvice Lakes in Croatia expressed their concerns about safety of selfie-taking tourists. A number of tourists had fallen off a cliff into a forty meter deep hole, while another couple slipped twenty meters into another similar hole while trying to set up a perfect photographic composition. The number of people dying in a hunt for the most extreme self-portraits, hanging from the top of the solitaire in Russia, or walking back as on the Plitvice lakes in Croatia, is increasing. The media is reporting about 55,000 accidents currently, and between 2011 and 2017, there were 259 deaths registered.[2] The number of accidents in selfie culture has grown greater than in any other photographic genre; larger than the number of photo-reporters killed in any war. The selfie camera, becoming the first camera that centers the culture of living around the medium, as for selfie celebrities for whom some things are lived in order to be recorded, not the other way around, has become, among other things, a suicidal machine as well.

Simultaneous to these fortuitous events, another genre of selfies represents death as it was never done before; showing terminally ill people in hospitals, suicide attempts, human corpses laying at streets, carried in coroner's transport, or even excavated from graves after months of

decaying, striking with their disgraceful representations of passed humans, but also their unstaged lifelessness. The terrible scenes are always set behind the back of the selfie maker, in the second plane, where functioning as a mere decorative backdrop to the smiled persona in their front. Not addressing the corpse directly, these self-portraitists seem as to control their actual fears of death, by mediation and miniaturization in the mobile screen.

Both of these types of selfies—one representing death and one actively producing it; the morbid and the ones that only turns morbid by its consequence—are speaking to distorted relationships of images as trophies (under any condition, including that of one's life). In addition to distorting the relationship to death, both types of selfies are also abolishing the lived physical reality by mediating it. But has both death and physical reality come to be depicted as the second-order reality, or a mere background of a self-representation?

Backworld as Past

Selfies which record and those that are actively producing death have something in common: a technologization bringing a distance to nature, counting also a distant view on death as the natural event. An interesting majority of these accidents are happening at the sites of the last natural resources on the planet—such as sites of lakes and waterfalls. Paradoxically, here technology pushes people into the nature which then becomes a prosecutor. Nature, as Plitvice lakes, as well as Grand Canyon, Machu Picchu, and Victoria Falls are now becoming hostile to humans. Not for their unpredictable tectonic events, or even human-induced extreme weather or by the act of wild species, but from a position within the technological and natural environment. Yet, soon these landscapes will, according to warnings of the Anthropocene writers, cease to exist too.

Photographs in the age of progress are even scarier as the medium itself was invented in the Second Industrial Revolution, initiating the extinction of life. Photography seems to have ended up as a silent witness of such extinction. As in images of extinct species, recording the failing biological diversity, saving images for the future, selfie photography with death, and producing death also records the life termination. But in actions of recording, selfie creators seem to literarily die into a technical image, yet not as Narcissus forwards into the water, but in the mediated image in the back. One cannot help to recall Walter Benjamin's reference to the

idea of progress as looking to front, to future, in writing on Paul Klee's painting. In the next passage Benjamin describes Angelus Novus.

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. (…) The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[3]

Similarly to Angelus Novus, but also backwardness Nietzsche recognizes in dark ages of backworlds (saying; "their own body is for them the thing-in-itself," which is then all there is), selfie authors are propelled into their technological future, which messes with their naïve perception.[4]

The Selfie and the Backworld

Besides being Anthropocene genre of earth, the selfie is also a proper post-digital genre, clashing gazes of humans and machines in order to provide a hybrid totalized image in which we see both the world in front with the mobile camera and a world in back only inside of it, as an integrated, total experience. Mobiles integrate mediated backwords into naturally accessed *frontworlds*. They serve for enhancing the vision, by stretching the view field, but also for purposes of control of the world behind one's back or the backworld reflected on the mirror screen. The backworld is a part of our immediate world, paradoxically, hardly accessible to our visual sense. Although inaccessible, the backworld is necessary not only for the formation of our spatial and personal body relations, but also for supporting all the symbols and metaphors derived from them, thus formulating our ideas of continuity, past tense, narrative, and history as such. Besides metaphorically, backworld as the immediate invisibility serves to define visible part of the world, making it an important part of our visual culture. Many of our interpretations of reality lay on this perceptual pre-condition, or more precisely its limit, as definitions of perspective, recourse, and a viewpoint, defining our orientation and position in space against everything else assumed as existing. The invisible part of the world underlines the visible by determining its limits, in terms of invisibility defined by Merleau Ponty.[5] It refers to a certain blindness existing in the visual culture mentioned already by Derrida, analyzing notions of visibility that includes non-visibility defined in his *Blind man*.[6]

In that essay, an artist could not paint himself as he was either observing himself or painting. Similar visual distractions that exist between the moment the painter sees himself in the mirror and the moment he paints his image, exists also in the sense of the integrity of the real world.

For not being seen, but at the same time being crucial in order to define the visible world, the rise of the backworld undermines the complete Western culture as predominantly visual and centered around the perception of the single sense; the eye. While auditory and olfactory senses describe the world behind our backs as continuous, the full view around is completely discontinuous to visual sense. In natural viewing conditions, it is impossible to see the immediate space behind. The continuity and integration of our immediate 360° environment is maintained in synchronicity with other senses; auditive and haptic primarily, constructing the nearly full environment Marr named 2.5D visual environment.[7] The visual apparatus, apart from occasional controls by head turnarounds or spinning of the body, is mostly merging recent memory-based images with data from ephemeral senses.[8] Thus the full sense of immersion into reality in front and back is an assemblage of short-term memory, experience, and anticipation. And that might be the reason the backworld was, since the beginning of the same, Western culture, referred to fears and seen as the world of death.

The World Behind Our Back in Culture

These two conceptions of the world—irrational fear of future which leads to death and rational use of tools for mastering the reality, both in regard to the backworld are present in two ancient myths I find conflicting. Among many references to the world in back as the world of death or having a capacity to kill, ancient myths on Orpheus and Perseus appear very interesting. The first myth defines the world behind spacewise, while the other as a timewise phenomenon. The world behind back of Orpheus is a fixed land of death, while the one behind Perseus is an action-field, he turns his back against a dangerous creature which can also use the space. Orpheus is being forbidden to look back into Hades in order to bring his love, Eurydice, alive from that world of death. Confronting death, Orpheus confronts his own insecurity, gazing at Hades directly, facing it with naked, unmediated vision works (more contemporary, and somehow more trivial, is the urban legend on Edward Mordake, who was told to have another face on the back of his head).[9]

Contrary to irrational Orpheus, Perseus rationally controls the world he does not and should not see. Perseus, to whom I returned frequently in my recent writings, used a polished shield to monitor dangerous Gorgon Medusa, whose eyes could kill anyone who gazes at her directly. In order not to look straight into the eyes of the Medusa, Perseus took a mirroring surface, turning his back to Medusa, or more precisely; in the back-aside, so he could see her as in reflection. And the same way selfie makers turn to dead bodies in their back, in order to master the reality. Didi-Huberman describes the way prisoners in the Auschwitz also control the reality:

> Perseus confronts the Gorgona in spite of all, and this in spite of all—this is de facto possibility, despite a legitimate impossibility—is called image, the shield and the reflection are not only protection but weapons, ruse, technical means for beheading the monster. […] The story of Perseus teaches us […] the power of confrontation of this Real.[10]

The difference between the Orpheus and Perseus myth the expected and non-expected backworld, but also natural and artificial confrontation to the backworld. While Orpheus does not trust gods and is afraid because of the events behind his back, Perseus is self-confident in his use of a mirroring device. These two myths can be taken as framing the visuality of the Western culture; while one describes the backworld as a site of insecurity, the other is mastering it by a mediation. In the following sections I analyze both the Orpheusian fear of the backworld, present in for example film and Perseusian control in the context of mobile phones monitoring and (mis)controlling the world behind the back.

Orpheus' Fear of the Backworld

Leonardo referred to the world in back as universal, claiming that the "sun never sees its shadow."[11] Maybe for its non-availability to the eye, but also often confusing spatial information provided by other senses, the backworld provoked many insecurities, but also fears that can be as deep as paranoiac delusions, as in fears of being stalked or observed (*scopophobia*). In addition to psychology and pathology of perception, the backworld was recognized as one of horrors of metaphysics. This horror of the backworld was described, as for example, in Albrecht Dúrer's *Vanity and the Devil* as an idea that the world behind our back is a devil's

ass which comes forth itself. It also appears the theme of Orpheus in Rilke's poems.[12]

The master of the horror of the backworld was Alfred Hitchcock, often seen as an inventor of a genre of fear but also of visual focus on the back. In his films, the audience sees the danger behind a protagonist, who is at the same time not informed of it. In the gap between the helpless position of the protagonists, not knowing what is going on, but also of the audience being informed but unable to cross the screen barrier of the medium to help the protagonist, an original suspension is made. The media inputs the distance between the protagonist and audience, still privileging the audience by giving more information about what is behind the protagonist's back. The background action from the second plan suddenly, by the power of the unpredictable accident, intervenes in the plot, leaving the protagonist helpless, as insecure Orpheus wandering if Eurydice follows. But then, for his insecurity, he slips out or into it.

In analyzing films, Wills has introduced the concept of dorsality, which can be helpful for understanding the mediated backworld. He defined dorsality as "a name for that which, from behind, from or in the back of the human, turns (it) into something technological, some technological thing."[13] He continued: "but what is believed cannot be seen without turning, knowing what is 'in back' recognises the composed artifice, a double mirror, hence an inverted narcissism."[14] This doubling by technology is also appearing in selfies, which integrate not naturally split realities but also natural and technological visions, among which one interprets the reality indirectly, by reporting on it. Yet, this use of the mirroring device to control the backworld is not solitary and has not been initiated either by film or selfie camera.

The same helplessness as in horror films is appearing in selfies recorded at funerals, dissection departments, or even graveyards in analyzing how the corpse, cadaver, and grave appear behind someone. In selfies, those dead people, terminal patients, and graves appear behind the back of a person self-portraying, thus outside of his natural view. That is why subgenres of selfies as "dark selfies," "funeral selfies," or "memorial selfies" are in a line with classic horror genre. In all of them, death arrives from the back on the person who is self-portraying and stays there as a fixed reality. Alike in horror films, remote viewers of selfies are forced to see something in which they cannot intervene. Yet, contrary to the horror genre, in which the audience is forced to see the danger behind the back of the protagonist, the horror of dark selfies appears integrated into an

augmented reality and then controlled by the protagonist. While the audience sees the death behind the person frontally, the person recording it turns its back toward it, perceiving the terrible scene only mediated and in the second plane.

The mirror of the mobile gives power Orpheus did not have, to resolve own insecurity, rationalizing the fear. In the most extreme selfies address the danger indirectly, similarly to the way Perseus did, via a polished shield. And that is not the first overlap among the irrational and rational approach to the backworld.

Perseus and the Backworld

One of the first devices to be used to monitor dorsal reality was the obsidian glass, previously used to observe the solar eclipse by Mayan Indians. Using such a mirror in order to visualize but also paint the back reality come more frequent since the invention of the Claude glass or so-called black mirror (*Specchio nero*, *Schwartz-spiegl*). The Claude glass is a small piece of usually convex, tinted mirror used to depict the landscape in the manner of landscape painters from the seventeenth century, Claude Lorrain.[15] The image seen in the mirror was specific, underexposed, sharper, and more contrasted, having a peculiar gold and metallic blue tone.[16] Being darker, it easily fit into a context of the nineteenth-century aesthetic concept of sublime and its fascination with death, culminating with the fear from the world behind one's back.[17] In analyzing the implementation of such mirrors, Maillet has shown special interest in beliefs as clairvoyance, captomancy, but also "perversions lust, bondage, S-M. Depravity, scatology, satanism."[18] The practice of painting in Lorrain's manner was popular until 1820.[19]

Claude Glass was a concave mirror. Each reflecting visual tool and innovation changed the way the world behind our back was seen, for example, concave, convex, and a flat mirror. Concave mirror has shown more of the world behind the back, while simultaneously miniaturizing the portrait set in-front of it, in the first plane. The convex mirror, invented in the next phase of development in history of mirrors, has displayed the opposite; a larger portrait at the expense of the backworld. Finally, a neutral, flat mirror has displayed the balanced relationship among the two. Development of mirrors was mirrored in the self-portraying genre. In the early canonical self-portraits, such as ones of Mantegna or Jan Van Eyck, the picture has shown more of

the surrounding ambient than of the self-portrait, which was somehow hidden as a detail of the background. Reaching the times of a modern age, and implementing a convex mirror, the figure in the self-portrait becomes larger. In Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in the Convex Mirror*, this perturbation of values among the self-portrait and the landscape in the back is more than clear.

In the post-digital era, as I have already elaborated in other essays the subject's surrounding regained the image space, now again presenting more of the background than the portrait.[20] This is especially the case in selfie-reports as tourist selfies. Today, as in late medieval and early Renaissance self-portraits, the picture is again including more of the background around the figure, lessening its importance. Contemporary selfie culture shifts the whole interest of the visual culture from something in front, as objects and landscape, toward something in behind, translating genres to a back vision. Re-appearance of the world from behind in the contemporary self-portraiture indicates a sharper split between the Modernist tradition of self-reference and postmodern self-analysis and a new look back at the nature and culture (both in cases of tourist selfies), reproaching the landscape genre with new technology of the back-vision.

Now instead of being observed ahead, landscapes appear in the back, behind the subject. The growing fashion of pushing the reality in back provoked new genres, previously not existing for the reason it was impossible to look straightly to such content, as corpses, coffins, and graves. Not exactly facing the horror of death, but pushing it into unconscious back, selfie culture acts as if it is a naïve game.

Optical Distortions

In addition to the width of representation, the backworld technologies also change its image depth. So, if in a concave mirror the person self-recording appears more distant, while in the convex nearer, the same is the case for the space represented too. This was already symptomized with the use of Claude's mirror.[21] For that reason, the warning that objects seen in the back may appear closer than they are, were issued with rear-view mirrors. With their use in cars, another perceptional error came clear; there is a blind spot [*punctum* cae*cum*], or a certain "visual shadow" due to a size of the car, preventing the view of the backworld in the full range. Many accidents are related to missing part of the image. Although having a lot in common to the rear-view mirror, selfie mobile camera does not

come with a warning for the errors of mediated perception. Yet, similar to other rear-optics, Claude mirror, rear-view, mobile phone back cameras are enhancing incorrect assumptions about the space and producing many incidents. Some of them are making objects in the back seem farer, while other make existing space in the back seem more expansive.[22]

What is peculiar for the mobile phone integration of backworlds and frontworlds is that it is full of errors of disproportions. While camera selfies merge the natural with an artificial perception, combining them in an amalgam, their ratio is not operating at adequate scales. Although scientists claim that augmented reality should enhance a backwards walk with the new tool of back-vision, the number of accidents has only enlarged. Most accidents that occur while recording selfies are said to be in a direct relationship to the lack of attention on the actual place while performing the action occurring on the mobile screen. Smart phones become more a cybernetic device than a photographic one, as its interface serves epistemological purposes of transmission and mediation, rather than being the mere storage of our ontological depiction of reality as the ordinary photography.

While walking, represented space fuses with the actual space ahead, providing an assembled 360° illusion. By merging the immediately viewed reality in front with the mediated one in the back, back or rear-facing camera provide a feeling of total immersion into the actual space. It is bridging the real experience of the world ahead, together with the remote experience of the world in back. Space sensed remotely is integrated into a vision of the actual space, floating on it, and providing a constructed, technical version of reality. The person recording the selfie sees space both front and back, but in different sizes and measures. A new, assembled reality is not forming a full and coherent illusion, as it is framed, resized, computed, and mediated, shaped by conditions of the clash between natural, technical, and artificial visions.[23]

Considering the size of the mobile phone screen, the augmentation produces scale error. As the two realities have a different aspect ratio, because of the implementation of the wide-angle lenses, the spatial information is confusing. There are two different perspectives; the straight one and the inverted or mirrored one, that may confuse the integrity of the experience of the world. If the view angle of the mobile camera is slightly decentered, then even the real angle and perspectives are not matching. A collision of back and front image produces a *diplopia*, a doubled vision, an error usually accompanying the augmented reality experience. The clash

of the actual space and image space is producing a distorted full round view, or a "variable sphere" common to wide space representations, as noted by Grau, as being patched from images of different ratio.[24] Selfie makers are confusing the mediated image for the reality itself, not being aware of its parallax. And in them self-assured Perseus, trying to control reality with a mirroring devices gets killed.

Still, why does the feeling of immersion into such a small image comes as such an overwhelming experience? The person recording seems to be tricked by their own self-image in the first plane which narcissistically draws attention from any errors. Optical technology provides a fully confusing sense data, once merged with the natural vision, as the totality of senses are disjointed; the haptic sense showing the same place, whereas vision showing an augmented reality of the impossible space. Both the use of the mobile phone to resolve the fear of death with Orpheus and to control and monitor reality as with Perseus, are having describing the contemporary age in which irrational visions can be drowned in technologies, while rationalist explanations are destined to a failure.

We have brought the life on the planet toward an extinction in the Anthropocene, led by the Modernist idea of the progress which propels Angelus Novus into the future. Self-portrait, a genre negotiating our personal relationship to reality till the times of the Modern has registered well with this rise of the (human) subject at the expense of the natural. Now, it registers the opposite process—that in which the backdrop events are costing the first plane its existence. The backworld in the mobile culture has miniaturized and has become the mere backdrop of a self-portrait, as a compressed danger. Thus, for the reason of miniaturization, it seems selfie makers that fall down the cliffs walking backwards are killed into the image produced by a mobile phone. Yet, isn't the image all that would be left out of all biological diversity?

Notes

1. Nietzsche (2006).
2. Bansal et al. (2018).
3. Benjamin (1969, 249).
4. Yet the meaning of the backworld is similar to Nietzsche's idea of the hinterworld in which the backwards "believe most in the body, and their own body is to them their thing in itself" (Nietzsche 2006, 22).
5. Merleau-Ponty (1968).
6. Derrida (1993).

7. Marr (1982).
8. Many authors have introduced a concept of “haptic visuality.” Touch-based perception renders visual space which has not been originally experienced visually at all.
9. Although no sources mention its visually guarding capacities, some refer to the back-face capacity to speak (and disturb) Mordake who has, sources agree, died by suicide at the age of 23. The image of Mordake, still, persists as a certain horror which in reality may occur with conjoined twins, or so-called Siamese twins.
10. Didi-Huberman (2008, 179).
11. Leonardo da Vinci, 300 r.b.
12. And are more elaborated in writings by Maurice Blanchot analyzing the gaze of Orpheus (Blanchot 1995).
13. Wills (2008, 5).
14. Ibid.
15. Claude glass was commonly a portable, 10–12 cm large, round piece of glass, tinted with a dark, commonly black coating. It was named after Claude Lorrain (Maillet 2004).
16. Also described by Gombrich (2000, 38).
17. Ibid.
18. Maillet (2004, 74).
19. Maillet analyzed how images produced by the use of a Claude mirror slowly reached the meaning of universal ones, as “[t]he Claude mirror eliminates particular details and imperfections. This removal of triviality brings forth an abstraction, that of ideal beauty” (Maillet 2004, 143).
20. Peraica (2017; 2018, 48–54).
21. Maillet reports on the case of tourist Charles Ghough who died image hunting on Helvellyn, using the Claude mirror (Maillet 2004).
22. Rear-view mirrors are today replaced by cameras, streaming the video image directly from the back of the car, thus avoiding the corpus of the machine to hide parts of the view, which usually happened with the mirror. Still, in many cases this expanded field of vision is rather augmenting reality in a way that it produces a parallax.
23. A mobile phone display, commonly of a tiny size, is surrounded by the rest of reality we depict with our frontal vision.
24. Grau (2003, 252).

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Algorithmic Facial Image (AFI), Datafication and Truth Value

Mitra Azar

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> "*There is the first very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. [...] There is an essential poverty in the face, the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence*"
> *(Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and infinity)*

This essay examines the political implications of new technologies for facial recognition. Here, I will argue that when the selfie becomes mediated by new tracking technologies applied to both security systems and entertainment applications based on face-recognition algorithms, it becomes an 'Algorithmic Facial Image' (AFI). Departing from this newly crafted expression, the essay investigates a new type of selfie aesthetic characterized by new forms of human and machinic agency. If in the

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early 2000s the selfie seemed to be characterized by a certain degree of (calculated) spontaneity, an analogically constructed liveness and a form of human agency, this new form of selfie is rather defined by its trackability, its algorithmically constructed liveness and its non-human agency.

Facial tracking technologies have been incorporated in digital cameras for many years, and are offered to users of social networks such as Facebook to facilitate and automatize tagging (the process of recognizing someone's face in a picture and associating it with their user profiles) and image sharing. Nevertheless, in recent times, facial recognition technologies seem to have taken a new turn, and they have become embedded in mainstream security technologies as much as in entertaining 'face swap' apps, transforming the social and cultural implications of the selfie, with increasingly relevant social and cultural implications. The new status of the selfie is evident in a number of examples. The most recent iPhone X unlocks by recognizing the face of its owner despite make-up, glasses and haircut variations.[1] New Mastercard technology allows payment by tracking unique bio-metric features of the users, namely fingerprints and/or faces.[2] At the same time, apps such as MSQRD (Masquerade) or Face Stealer allow users to 'face swap' in real-time, that is to modify their facial traits by assuming those of somebody else—either friends, monkeys or well-known public figures.[3] Other apps simply 'cartoonize' facial features: this is the case of Snapchat, and Meitu—a viral Chinese app that has been regarded by security experts as a privacy nightmare, in relation to the rapacity with which it is capable of extracting data from user's phones.[4] The same goes for FaceApp, an app developed in Russia which is capable to turn people's faces into an older version of themselves. The app gets access to users' faces stored on mobile phones, and move them from the users' phone to proprietary servers, where AI algorithms finally intervene on those faces before sending them back to the user's device. According to cyber security experts, this process could well happen on the user's device, without the need of storing any data on proprietary servers (Fig. 1).[5]

Lately, the 2017 Deepfakes online phenomena emerging on the online community Reddit[6]—where faces of celebrities are swapped over pornostars' bodies while performing in adult movies—proves the algorithmic precision of neural networks behind facial recognition technologies, able to function not only in real-time but also with moving images. At the beginning of the summer of 2019, face recognition technology has

Fig. 1 MSQRD app. Screenshots from the Internet

definitely emerged as one of the most intricate and fast evolving techno-political battlefields for current and future times. In May, San Francisco bans the use of facial recognition technologies by city and county agencies. By doing so, the municipality acknowledges the bias in-built in the design of AI algorithms for facial recognition, which are trained on datasets of faces which inflate the link between people of colour and criminal activities.[7] As Dubal Veena points out, 'face recognition systems — like other surveillance technology before it — can disproportionately harm people already historically subject to profiling and abuse, including immigrants, people of color, political activists, and the formerly incarcerated'.[8] This happens to be the reality in London, where a survey finds out that 'London police's face recognition system gets it wrong 81% of the time'.[9] Furthemore, in June 2019, artist and technologist Adam Harvey discloses *Megapixel*, 'an art and research project that investigates the ethics, origins, and individual privacy implications of face recognition image datasets and their role in the expansion of biometric surveillance technologies'.[10] Harvey finds out that some of the faces included in dataset used by military researchers are scraped from the internet without

people's consent. As a consequence Microsoft, Stanford and Duke takes down their face datasets from the internet.[11] It is in this new technological context that this essay aims to highlight the underlining aesthetic, political and epistemological implications related to face tracking technologies, and argues that this new phase of the selfie culture can be framed by introducing the notion of the 'Algorithmic Facial Image' (AFI) inspired by the notion of 'Digital Facial Image' (DFI)[12] by Mark B. N. Hansen, and the concept of 'faciality machine'[13] by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The essay, indeed, draws a 'line of flight'[14] that goes from Deleuze and Guattari's faciality machine to Hansen's DFI, and proposes the AFI as a new theoretical tool to understand the interaction between user's body, affects and algorithmic technologies in relation to the production of a new selfie aesthetic. This interaction seems to hybridize the features of the faciality machine and of the DFI into a new type of image which the expression 'Algorithmic Facial Image' seeks to describe.

From Faciality Machine to Digital Facial Image

The Digital Facial Image (DFI) is a type of computer-generated facial image identified by media theorist Mark B. N. Hansen in the domain of media art. In the artwork *Dream of Beauty 2.0* by Kirsten Geisler, cited by Hansen, for instance, a digital autonomous face addresses the audience's affective body, turning it into the framing device for the interaction between the digital and the embodied human: 'an interactive, voice activated installation with a digitally generated female persona' invites the audience into 'an intense affective experience that forms a kind of human counterpart to the potential autonomy of the digital, a new domain of human embodiment that emerges out of our response to digitization'.[15] According to Hansen, whereas the currently predominant model of the human–computer-interface (HCI) functions precisely by reducing the wide-bandwidth of embodied human expressivity to a fixed repertoire of functions and icons, the DFI transfers the site of this interface from computer-embodied functions to the open-ended, positive feedback loop connecting digital information with the entire affective register operative in the embodied viewer-participant.[16] Thus, Hansen senses a paradigmatic shift from HCI (Human Computer Interface) to DFI (Digital Facial Image), and it is here that the face becomes the 'medium for the

interface between the embodied human and the domain of digital information'.[17] Hansen defines the DFI in relation to the concept of faciality machine elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari: 'this machine is called the faciality machine because it is the social production of the face, because it performs the facialization of the entire body [...]. The deterritorialization of the body implies a reterritorialization on the face [...]'.[18] According to Hansen, Deleuze and Guattari's faciality machine produces the facialization of the entire body and by doing so it prepares the emancipation of affects from its ties to the body. The faciality machine simply requires a receptive surface, characterized by intensive micro-movements: the face is this organ-carrying plate of nerves which has sacrificed most of its global mobility and which gathers or expresses all kinds of tiny local movements which the rest of the body usually keeps hidden. Each time we discover these two poles in something—reflective surface and intensive micro-movements—we can say that this thing has been treated as a face.[19] Because the faciality machine can potentially turn anything into a face, it can produce affects in the absence of a body. Close-ups of objects *framed* as face in this sense are common in the history of cinema,[20] and possess 'the power to tear the image away from spatio-temporal co-ordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed'.[21] According to Hansen, Deleuze and Guattari subsume the bodily activity into the aesthetic quality of the close-up, and as a consequence affect becomes related to the framing function rather than to the body, and subsumed from perception. Hansen criticizes this position, and follows a more orthodox approach to French philosopher Henri Bergson's theory of affect[22] (on which Deleuze and Guattari's reflection is partly derived) by locating affectivity as the structuring device for processes of embodiment. Thus, the DFI produces the audience's embodied affective reaction, while affects operate (or structure) the mediation between informatics and the embodied human. According to Hansen, this change in perspective from Deleuze's understanding is not trivial because it allows us to keep the human (and the body) as a key element in relation to digital technologies, avoiding a 'more nihilistic posthumanism of, say, German media scientist Friedrich Kittler, who has infamously pronounced the structural irrelevance of the human in the face of digital convergence'.[23]

From Digital Facial Image (DFI) to Algorithmic Facial Image (AFI): Algorithmic Facial Image as Hybrid Between DFI and Facial Machine

The functioning of new face tracking technologies seems to work differently from the functioning of the DFI described by Hansen, and the notion I propose with the expression Algorithmic Facial Image (AFI) tries to grapple with these changes. It is necessary to investigate the different functions of these two types of images closely as they have different political implications. On the one hand, according to Hansen, the DFI produces the 'dynamic re-embodiment of the interface, [and] reverses precisely this process of facialization that comprises the very principle of the HCI as an instrument of capitalist semiotics'.[24] HCI seems, in other words, to exploit the separation of affects from bodies described by Deleuze and Guattari as the defining feature of the faciality machine; separation which allows the capitalization of everything and makes use of facialization as the mechanism producing the movement from 'the organic strata [of the body] to the [the HCI] strata of capitalist signifiance and subjectivation'.[25] The DFI, according to Hansen, seems to resist this process of facialization and transforms the face into 'the catalyst for a reinvestment of the body as the rich source for meaning and the precondition for communication'.[26] On the other hand, when it comes to the politics of the AFI, it is possible to see how its functioning is consistent with capitalist semiotics—indeed with the faciality machine—and yet some of the working mechanisms behind it echo the DFI. With the AFI, I argue, the faciality machine hybridizes with the DFI.

To understand how this hybridization comes into being, I propose to look at the differences between the DFI and AFI, and to then relate them to the functions of the faciality machine. First of all, there's a change of context to register: if the DFI is understood in relation to media art, the AFI appears in more mainstream and vernacular contexts (for example in security systems and entertainment apps). Moreover, if in the case of the AFI the user's face is simultaneously the subject and the object of the interface (as it happens with face swap apps), in the case of DFI the face is always the face of a digital avatar. Furthermore, the user's affective reaction which defines the DFI is captured by the algorithmic processes behind the AFI through the user's face. Thus, If the faciality machine of Deleuze and Guattari 'overcode[s] the body on the face',[27] and the DFI decodes the avatar's face into the user's affective embodiment, the AFI

decodes the user's affective embodiment (in the form of the user's face) into algorithmic data. As a consequence, the AFI echoes the functioning of the DFI but works as a faciality machine: this is because it exploits the affective-embodiment of the user (rather than reconnecting the user to his/her affective-embodied self as in Hansen's DFI) and turns it into a compulsive ritual (the 'selfie performativity', with its 'poses' and 'countenance' in the words of Levinas), which enables surveillance-oriented non-human algorithmic procedures aligned with a postmodern type of faciality machine. The body is in the circuit only as input and output, but not in-between, where everything is played out within the computational functioning of the AFI reacting to the user's facial affective input. In the AFI, the accent is on the hidden algorithmic processes that the user's embodied affect (literally, the face of the user) has produced. In Hansen's DFI, the accent is instead on the embodied affect itself as the medium of the interaction between the user and the DFI. Thus, if the DFI focuses on the affective input, the AFI focuses on the algorithmic manipulation of the affective input.

If both DFI and AFI asks the embodied human to complete affectively the functioning of the interface, the AFI seems to exploit the affective source coming from the user to produce the affective user it is interacting with. This production consists practically in the visual re-organization of the user's facial traits—in Deleuzian terms the re-organization of the relationship between receptive surface and micro-movements—and in the parallel production of a data-selfie. In the case of the AFI, indeed, the face triggers a mutilated form of affective-bodily response instrumental to the algorithmic processes oriented towards producing this visual and data re-organization. This is significant because in the AFI it seems that both the mutilated, embodied, affective framing function (the selfie performativity) and the disembodied algorithmic production (the real-time re-organization of the relationship between receptive surface and micro-movements as completely removed from the physical body) co-exist as necessary moments towards the formation of the AFI, testifying to the hybridization of the DFI with the faciality machine. If, according to Hansen, 'aesthetic experimentations with the DFI strike directly against late capitalist semiotic mechanisms [...] that function specifically by reducing embodied singularity to facialized generality',[28] the AFI seems instead to reduce the affective embodiment of the user to a stereotypical performativity—the impoverished selfie performativity which appears as an embodied version of what Andersen and Pold have

called the 'aesthetic of the banal',[29] necessary to activate the algorithmic processes happening behind the surface of the AFI. The AFI is thus enabled to extract data from the user's face but also from the user's phone—towards producing a data-selfie to be sold on the big data market. The privacy nightmare mentioned at the beginning of this essay in relation to Meitu face swap app stands as an example of this parallel visual and data production-extraction.

Algorithmic Facial Image, Regimes of Truth and Datafication

It seems reasonable to say that the new technological processes of engaging with the human face trigger a new phase of the selfie aesthetic, and a new understanding of the notion of the face itself. If face-tracking technologies are based on the idea that one's face is unique and non-replicable, the amount of entertaining face-tweaking apps available on the market seems to suggest that the face is indeed trackable, its features tweakable and its uniqueness hackable. This is especially (and frighteningly) evident in relation to a software developed by Stanford University[30] which enables a visual re-enactment method wherein two men's facial expressions are motion-tracked and recorded, to be then swapped in real-time over a screen: the man standing and not talking now talks and replicates the facial expressions of the other (Real-time Facial Re-enactment software). This is the same type of technology behind DeepFakes, with the difference that the script behind DeepFakes has been open-sourced on the Reddit DeepFake community (Fig. 2).[31]

The face as the privileged body part bearing the user's 'singularity', becomes the playground for testing and refining tracking algorithms. The face as a peculiar site of singularity turns into the privileged site for trackability and datafication,[32] and its uniqueness gets challenged by the aggression of technologies which, the more they function as new biometric security systems based on the singularity of one's face, the more they transform the face into a replicable surface—as the Stanford face swapping software clearly demonstrates—undermining the very epistemological assumptions on which face-tracking security systems are based. As a consequence, the truth value held by the face becomes unassessable, and the selfie turns into the site where contradictory regimes of truth coexist and feed each other—becoming an aesthetic format which keeps an appearance of immediacy while hiding layers of algorithmic

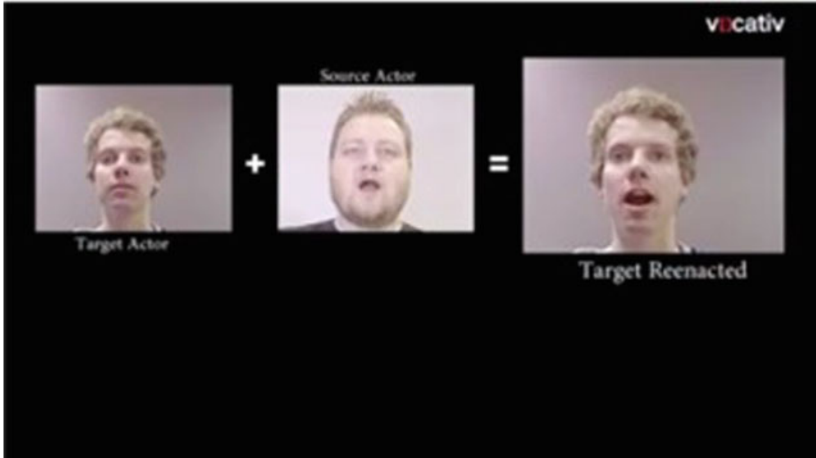

Fig. 2 Stanford real-time face swapping software. Screenshot from Youtube

complexity. The political relevance of the AFI lies in the ambivalent regime of truth to which it belongs, and on the related practices of 'circulationism'[33] and datafication this regime produces. At the same time, the hermeneutic confusion seems already to manifest in a number of selfies from contemporary internet culture: from Abdou Diouf's Instagram account[34] show-casing selfies of himself crossing borders from Africa to Europe—custom-made by a Spanish advertising firm to promote a photography festival[35]; to the Selfie of a young Palestinian man running away from two Israeli policemen—custom-made by Dam, hip hop trio from Ramallah.[36] The very idea of thinking of selfies (and of the face as their bodily reference) as a (calculated but still) spontaneous and truthful 'reality grab'—the way it was perceived in the early 2000s—seems to have collapsed (Figs. 3 and 4).

The contemporary selfie aesthetic seems to have already moved towards the algorithmically constructed hermeneutic ambiguity of the AFI, and prepares the ground for it. For example, the AFI taken by the car-sized rover Curiosity exploring the Gale crater on the planet Mars—and realized by combining a number of shots from which an algorithm subtracts the arm holding the camera from the composed image[37]—exposes a newly constructed yet apparently immediate regime of truth similar to the ones described above (Fig. 5).

Fig. 3 Abdou Diouf, Instagram fake profile

Something similar happens in the context of the AFI generated by Google car street view. If in the past users could pan down to the Google car camera and see the car and the 360 degrees camera device from which the images were taken, a recent update manages to make the car and the recording device disappear from the image.[38] Now users can only perceive the Google car from the shadow it projects on the ground—and are left with the sensation of controlling a fully virtual camera, and of seeing, once again, a newly constructed yet apparently immediate regime of truth (Fig. 6).

Thus, the new regime of visibility related to the AFI seems to be characterized by a paradoxical regime of truth. The specificity of this regime of truth bears important consequences with regard to the circulation and datafication of the AFI, and allows for a deeper understanding of its political implications in the post-truth era we are currently navigating. The AFI turns the face into a site where contradictory regimes of truth coexist in a form which keeps an appearance of immediacy while hiding layers of algorithmic complexity. From a hermeneutic perspective the art of circulation and data extraction of the AFI refers to the inherent liveness of the Internet: 'live' and 'immediate' AFI are virally shared through

Fig. 4 Dam, fake selfie of Palestinian running away from two Israeli policemen

Fig. 5 Curiosity on Mars

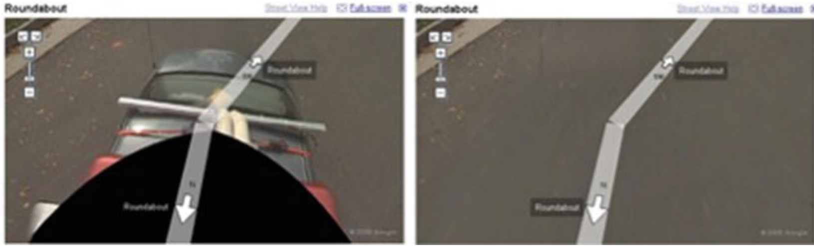

Fig. 6 Google Car Street View, before and after the update

social network platforms and datafied through algorithms implementing extraction practices behind the AFI surface. The AFI value derives from its circulation—itself derived from the appearance of immediacy the AFI preserves during the algorithmic processing—oriented towards what we might call first degree datafication or biodata extraction (facial features), and second degree datafication or info-data extraction (contacts, GPS, etc.). While engaging with the user's face, in parallel to a visual selfie, the AFI manages to produce a data-selfie of the user, which is then turned into an abstract affective subject to be sold to companies for targeted ads. This is how the AFI produces the affective subject it is interacting with, exploiting the user's embodied affective input (selfie performativity) as a means to gather user data and generate an algorithmic Self, one that is disembodied yet affectively programmed to intervene in the user's online and offline interactions and promote certain (affective) behaviours over other behaviours. Moreover, advertisers have a keen interest in these behaviours as part of a bigger system of data built around users which can help them understand how to target their ads better. Interestingly, the shrinking of the distance between 'fiction' and reality—what I have addressed as the hermeneutic confusion inherent to the regime of truth of the AFI—is indeed matched by the shrinking between an embodied affective 'singularity' (in the form of the user's face) and a surveillance-oriented disembodied algorithmic agency. This produces an algorithmic data-selfie retro-acting on the user by investing the user with the affective charge the AFI has built by combining biodata and infodata towards generating an online affective subject to be applied back on the offline user.

If the apparent immediate nature of the AFI is the reason behind its viral circulation, its algorithmic nature is instead the reason behind the

AFI's ability to extract data, and it works as an opaque mechanism behind the apparently transparent (immediate) and fast circulation of the AFI. If Hansen considers affectivity to be the genetic element of the DFI,[39] we might refer to an algorithmically constructed affectivity as the opaque genetic element of the AFI. Even better, we might refer to the algorithms designing the AFI as the AFI's genetic elements behind the constitution of an algorithmically constructed affectivity emerging from processes of circulation (based on the AFI hermeneutic ambiguity) and datafication (based on biodata and infodata extraction). These processes begin right after the 'poses' and 'countenances' defining the user's performativity activate the functioning of the AFI. The AFI mediates the transformation of an analog affective input into an algorithmic affective output, and prepares the further re-embodiment of the affective output into the analog affective flow of the user. In this sense, the functioning of the AFI is similar to the functioning of Deleuze and Guattari's faciality machine, which 'overcodes the body on the face',[40] however, with the difference that it overcodes it at the level of the algorithm—and not at the level of the framing. The AFI extracts a data-selfie from the facial affective input coming from the user, which is turned into an affective output specifically designed to re-direct the affective flow of the user—thus conditioning the user's behaviour, online and offline. The faciality machine of Deleuze and Guattari seems still able to provide a useful conceptual tool to encompass both the functioning of the AFI and DFI. The DFI and AFI remain material instantiations of the abstract faciality machine, and the differences between them can be read as variations. The different role of affects between faciality machine, DFI and the AFI proves the extreme flexibility of the facial machine—unsurprisingly capable of holding instantiations with very different political implications, as expected from a machine embedded in the semiotic fluxes of late capitalism.

Notes

1. Apple (2017).
2. Lomas (2016).
3. Dredge (2016).
4. Fried and Wagner (2017).
5. Brewster (2019).
6. Romano (2018).
7. Lynch (2018).
8. Veena (2019).

9. Jee (2019).
10. Harvey (2019).
11. Madhumita (2019).
12. Hansen (2003, 205–228).
13. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 167–191).
14. Ibidem, 9.
15. Hansen (2003, 207).
16. Ibidem.
17. Ibidem, 206.
18. Deleuze and Guattari, 181.
19. Ibidem, 87–88.
20. Ibidem, 89.
21. Ibidem, 96.
22. Bergson (1990, 17–77).
23. Hansen, 207.
24. Ibidem, 208.
25. Deleuze and Guattari, 181.
26. Hansen, 208.
27. Ibidem.
28. Ibidem, 209.
29. Andersen and Pold (2015).
30. Thies et al. (2016).
31. Romano (2018).
32. Cukier and Shoenberger (2013).
33. Steyerl (2013).
34. Diouf (2014).
35. Mackintosh (2015).
36. Withnall (2015).
37. Kaufman (2012).
38. Turnbull (2008).
39. Hansen (2003, 218).
40. Ibidem, 208.

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Reflecting on the Online Self Through the Looking-Glass: From Auto-Ethnography to Empathic Criticism

Donatella Della Ratta

… the only thing that should not have an end is the internet… Federica, the selfie class.

Intro: Networked is 'the New Black'

'Every day, I hold my iPhone as if it were part of me. Sometimes, I do not even notice it. I find myself looking for it everywhere. Look in the purse, nothing. So, look in the bedroom, still nothing. Then I start feeling that sense of fear and anxiety, which fastens my heartbeat. With the hands in my hair I start wondering how's it possible. I cannot have lost my black box. Then, I realize the phone is right in the pocket of my pants. Sometimes, it is part of me in such a way that I do not see the line that separates technology from my human being anymore'[1] *(Federica)*

Technology creates anxiety. The absence of technology creates anxiety. The constant fear of losing the connected device, the *black box*, which

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equals losing touch with one's network of friends and acquaintances, with personal memories and identity, haunts the networked individual of the new millennium. Yet an unspeakable desire secretly and almost inexplicably torments her at the same time: the wish to shut down all things networked and live an existence untroubled by ghost buzzing or FOMO. A life pre-unlimited Internet, once upon a time when connection was still a premium, not-for-all luxury.

This might look like schizophrenia, but hell it's not. Welcome to the new normal. We are all sick, as the kind of sickness generated by inhabiting our 'social reality'[2]—this hybrid monster existence merging the life organized around the repetitive needs of our decaying organic bodies with the endless stimuli, the eventfulness of the digital—is now pervasive. It has become a sort of accepted societal condition. It can be no longer called anomaly or pathology, as it is what makes our 24/7 daily routine, whether we like it or not.

We know what we do, but we do it *anyways*. Beyond Zizek's cynical motto that is now the 'new black' within our social reality, what is that we do, exactly? What is *that thing* about? What is so compelling about the networked that gets us hooked-up, while generating feelings of repulsion and making us all wanting to become digital luddites? Why do we wish that the Internet had an end, and, at the same time, we beg for the Wi-Fi password as the first thing when we get to any place? As Natalia writes, 'before even glancing at the restaurant menu we all jumped, as if racing to see as to who will connect first'.

Is this about compulsion, addiction, enslavement? Anxiety, loneliness, fear of being forgotten? Or, rather, something about unstoppable excitement, the need to discover, the search for the 'happy accident'[3]? Is it about all this together? Are these the same feelings that we experience offline, in a non-networked environment? Or do they bring up something unprecedented, something unknown, something belonging to the yet-to-be-determined? Raymond Williams calls it the emerging 'structure of feeling'[4] of a given society presenting itself in a mutant shape still in the making, yet able to suggest a pattern, a paradigm. It is about 'a culture of the period', about the moods and modes through which a generation 'responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting'.[5]

We are all confused by the 'great variety of morbid symptoms'[6] which Gramsci thought would be generated in the 'interregnum', the in-betweenness of the old that dies and the new that is not born yet. Are we

dealing with the same old feelings of the pre-networked era; or, rather, the machine-led impulses algorithmically generated take, for a lack of a better word, the appearance of familiar sadness, anger, boredom, while actually not being the same? What is unique to machine-generated feelings that escapes us, yet enslaves us?

The 'Selfie' Class: From Auto-Ethnography to 'Empathic Criticism'

> *'I don't remember any of the content which I viewed, I don't remember a single memorable text message, picture on Instagram, or news I read. I only remember the apps I use to see all those things. Updating is seductive and addicting' (Veronica)*

This essay deals with the structure of feeling of our networked times. It digs into this highly toxic material, the e-waste of our hyper-commodified and over-stimulated souls, using the auto-ethnographic method.[7] I undertook this journey into the fear and loathing of the online self with the precious help of the students from my class 'Beyond selfies: exploring networked identities'.[8]

In Spring 2019, the 'selfie class' was offered as a major elective course within the BA in Communications and Media Studies at John Cabot University, Rome. Thirteen students enrolled, a good number for an elective class taught for the first time. The majority of the students were female, average age around 20 years, originating from a diverse group of countries (USA, Italy, Norway, Bulgaria, Armenia, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Venezuela) but all sharing a familiarity with the American liberal arts education. One of them self-identified in public discussions as 'queer'.

Throughout the class I used auto-ethnography, which I deemed the most appropriate method to this subject matter, offering an approach that would not sound patronizing, elitist, or merely critical, but one that could take account of the 'empathy'[9] demanded to explore networked feelings. This chapter is an account of that semester, of my students' and my own's dealing with the fear and loathing of the online self. It turned out to be a unique journey into learning how to deconstruct the structure of feeling of our time, shifting the focus from our burdened neoliberal selves always on the verge of an emotional burnout, toward the collective and machine-led dimension producing this seemingly pervasive condition.

In combination with the auto-ethnographic part, the class also featured more traditional assignments, such as writing reflection pieces discussing critical theory, from Eva Illouz's emotional capitalism to Kyle Jarrett' s account of the gift economy regulating online affective transactions; but also non-scholarly works taken from contemporary pop-culture, such as Melissa Broder's *So Sad Today*.[10] The selfie class, in the attempt of building a pedagogy combining the legacy of Frankfurt school's critical theory with feminist ethics of empathy and care,[11] provided the students with analytical tools to read and interpret their own and their peer's auto-ethnographic material, and unpack the latter's meaning and implications, in a sort of self-applied ideology critique. During the fourteen weeks of the course, one of our weekly class meetings was entirely devoted to a collective reading of the students' auto-ethnographic pieces[12] analyzed in connection with concepts and ideas learned from critical theory, often building analogies with global pop-culture (films, TV series, memes, etc.). The effort was to use the personal and the private in connection with the general and the universal; to start from the affective and end up with the critical and analytical, or vice versa.

Since our first encounter, I asked the students if they were comfortable with using auto-ethnography as the primary method to investigate the class subject. Most of them had never encountered ethnographic methods in their previous academic curriculum. After explaining the basics and giving them a piece to read at home[13] which we then discussed in a further class meeting, they seemed to be keen in experimenting with auto-ethnography and consented to test it in an assignment category which I dubbed 'media experiments'. This essay is articulated into sections discussing tropes and topics that I have extrapolated, in no specific linear or chronological order, from these auto-ethnographic experiments,'[14] integrating them with material gathered from class discussions, including keywords that were left on the classroom billboard after our debates.

Central to my attempt has been to deal with the highly emotional material generated by our networked selves using what Geert Lovink and I have dubbed 'empathic criticism', i.e., an approach where the need to criticize, unveil and therefore disrupt the mechanisms of emotional capitalism is combined with an attitude of empathy, compassion, and care. Rather than patronizing in an elitist fashion à-la Frankfurt school, or judging the younger generation trapped in the networked emotional loops feeding 'communicative capitalism',[15] empathic criticism acknowledges that no one can escape those loops. There is no such thing as being

immune. When it comes to being addicted to our social reality, we are the 99%. Disconnection is a luxury of the lucky few.[16] Digital detox is a mirage offered to the exhausted precarious, so-called ‘knowledge workers’ seeking redemption even if just for a weekend. Breath, disconnect, then restart on Monday with a fresher mind and the same old addiction.

The starting point to rethink our pedagogy, our philosophy of teaching, and even our way of approaching critical theory is to acknowledge that we are *all* sick.[17] Karlessi, a web-engineer in his forties who gave a workshop about ‘hacker pedagogy’ at John Cabot in Spring 2019, told the students: ‘you might laugh, but I have an addiction to emails. As much as old-fashioned this might seem to you, I have goose bumps when I get an email notification. I get immediately aroused, who’s this, what’s gonna happen, what is this gonna bring to me?’. They laughed. Yet this carries a very honest acknowledgment, that networked addiction takes different forms and formats and so, whether emails or streaks or stories, still addiction it is. Grown-ups plagued with ghost buzzing, compelled to watch, scroll down, comment, or answer on the spot to whatever input comes from the online realm, tell themselves that it is ‘work-related’, or just done ‘to kill time’ when in waiting rooms, public transportations, or at the toilet. They (we) claim to be able to control ‘it’ and stop whenever they (we) want. But we all know to what extent we are fooling ourselves.

The ‘hypnotic, *engaged disengagement* with the miasmic qualities of boredom, detachment, ennui, and malaise’[18] brought by networked technologies is what makes the ‘digital disaffect’, as Micheal Petit, author of an enlightening essay on how to teach and engage the screen generation, calls it. Digital disaffect is ‘the sensation of always being about to attain the one thing that will bring satisfaction, yet finding that it always, always, always lies just beyond reach’.[19] It is the thing that hooks you up and, at the same time, frustrates you. It is what keeps us glued to our screens because *something* might happen—the promise of ‘affect’,[20] the not-yet determined—, and yet at the same time haunts you and makes you feel to have ‘seen it before; been there, done that’.[21] Digital disaffect is the morbid wave of arousal and frustration that inundates all of us, the 99%.

The Textual Self, or *How to Bring Your 'Whole Self' to Life*

'I touch my smartphone more often than I touch another human being' (Frida)

Human interactions, touch, the body. Networked technologies are dramatically changing the way in which we think about them and make use of them in our daily life. More and more, the social self is turning into the social media self. One day, in order to reflect on these issues and unpack the relation between the physical and the online self, we read a chapter from Eva Illouz's 'Cold Intimacies'. The chapter starts off by discussing 'You've got mail', a successful movie from 1998 that addresses the topic of online dating as opposed to physical encounters as a way to find a significant other. To my great surprise, most of the students had watched the film and loved it. Although the protagonists' meet-ups take place on old-fashioned web-based chat services rather than fancy smartphone apps, yet the film suggests a way to think about the physical and 'the virtual' (an expression unanimously deemed 'way too 90's' by the class and replaced with 'the digital') that seems to be not too far from today's social reality. 'In the movie', writes Illouz, 'the Internet self appears to be far more authentic, genuine, and compassionate than the social public self, more likely to be dominated by fear of others, defensiveness, and deceit'.[22] The students would agree that the physical selves of the two protagonists were their worst part, pushed by social constraints to act one against the other in public, whereas the Internet had given them the emancipatory possibility to free their 'authentic, real selves',[23] letting their love story unfold.

'Those who have experienced the Internet in the 90's tend to think that the body comes first. You can perform a series of "virtual" identities online and play with that, experiment all sort of things. Of course, on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog', Kim argued during a class discussion, mocking the 'old-school' approach to the web. '…. but you are, in fact, a dog!', she added, referring to Peter Steiner's famous cartoon on The New Yorker.[24] Kim's remark was witty: she thought the generation who experienced the Internet in the early days would play with multiplicity online to then come back to the physical, to the organic, to

the wholeness of the body. Whereas Gen Z were in the exactly opposite situation, as their wholeness lied in the digital, not in the physical.

The identification process, the rejection of anonymity, and the imperative of user-profiling characterizing contemporary social networking sites had resulted in them thinking about the digital as the quintessential loci of wholeness. Because they were constantly identified and monitored online, they had ended up becoming *that thing*, the digital. No matter how shy, introvert, or socially awkward IRL,[25] their digital avatars were freed from those constraints. They were their 'authentic' selves. 'We know that they know we're dogs', Kim smartly clarified, 'but we just don't care, as long as they give us our "likes"'. And Natalia clarified, in one of her auto-ethnographies: 'My digital self is my best self. I show the world nothing but the best still moments of reality. I feel no negative emotion. I'm either confident, happy or giddy'.

The narratives and myths of the authenticity of the self have long been the mantra of Silicon Valley tech evangelists and entrepreneurs: 'the authentic self is godlike. Our true thoughts and feelings shouldn't be repressed behind the old-fashioned curtain of "manner". We should be "real" and disparage those who are "fake"'.[26] Since the Esalen Institute and the Human Potential Movement[27] started preaching about unleashing the individual's full potential by allowing the inner-self to express freely, discourses of the latter's supposed authenticity and genuineness have been thriving in the Bay area, evangelized by key figures of tech-entrepreneurs who were regulars at Esalen–among the many, Tim O'Reilly, the 'father' of the web 2.0.[28]

Today these narratives have succeeded in migrating from the hippy-like Californian underground scene to the Silicon Valley mainstream. Facebook has led this trend with Sheryl Sandberg's campaign 'Bring your authentic self to work'. 'Being your authentic self is the foundation of who we are as a company. Bringing your authentic self to work helps inspire those around you, to show vulnerability is brave', states the company's career webpage.[29] Sandberg's management motto, inspired by her personal experience of losing her husband and having to deal with the mourning process while being a working mother, seems to have worked, as the practice of 'checking-in' has been successfully introduced to the company's leadership meetings where on a daily basis 'each person around the table is invited to discuss their current emotional and professional state before they get down to business'.[30] Spreading this new vision of the workplace is key to Facebook's core business: getting people to tell

more, to open up more, to be more transparent about themselves. The myth of authenticity of the self generates more data, which sounds like gold for tech companies. 'Bring your whole self to work'[31]—as the motivational speaker Mike Robbins titles his latest 'how to' book guide—is a mantra in Silicon Valley.

The flaw in these ideas, so deeply ingrained in Silicon Valley tech culture and embedded in our digital daily life, is that defining the 'authenticity' of the self is problematic, to say the least. Award-winning journalist Will Storr, who embarked on a journey investigating the roots of the West's self-obsession, and visited, among many other places, also Esalen and its self-motivation workshops, argues that 'the self is a story'[32] we tell ourselves in order to make us believe that we are in control of (the narrative of) our life, in a world that is deeply incoherent, chaotic, and complex. During his trip in the abyss of our self-centredness, he pays a visit to Bruce Hood, a developmental psychologist who authored 'The Self Illusion: How the Social Brain Creates Identity'.[33] Hood calls the self 'a powerful deception generated by our brains for our benefit (…) a way that we can make sense of the things that happen to us'.[34] He maintains that 'you need to have a sense of the self in order to organize your life events into a *meaningful story*'.[35] The brain, following Hood's line of thought, is like a storyteller who creates a sequence of scenes in progress, upon which we build a narrative to make sense of the world, which we believe to be in control of. We tell ourselves the story of ourselves, where the self is the absolute protagonist, the hero of that story.

The universe of social networking platforms is entirely built around the idea of the self as a storyteller, a creator of a narrative centered around itself. Instagram 'stories' are the quintessential feature of such a well-orchestrated deception. A Facebook profile tells you when you are 'born', and organizes a series of life events in sequence, giving the illusion of control, suggesting what to remember, when to remember, giving highlights, creating a linear script of real-life: a 'timeline'. Yet this 'story' of the self is conceived within a space that is pre-organized, pre-scripted, by what Korinna Patellis calls 'the blockbuster software'.[36] It is Silicon Valley who creates the software within which we insert our 'story'. Within this pre-set environment, the self must be authentic and coherent. There is no space for the 'many' identities, as data mining works with coherence and consistency, not with fluidity, ambiguity, and queerness; as someone noticed during a class discussion, accounting of the personal experience

of being forced, after getting a notification from Facebook, to give up to a profile built anonymously.

But there is more than just the fantasy of the 'authentic' self that plays a role in configuring today's human interactions, and in reshaping the relation between the digital and the physical. The idea of the textual self is suggested by Illouz when discussing the process of 'textualization of subjectivity' triggered by networked technologies, in which 'the self is externalized and objectified through visual means of representation and language'.[37] In other words, online dating (and whatever activity happens on the networks) forces users to render themselves into 'texts', whether chats, bios, profile pictures, hashtags, etc. At first glance, this did not seem an issue for my class. When I asked them how we could express emotions when their quintessential performative site, the body, was absent and had to be rendered into textual communication, they had no hesitation in answering: 'there are emojis'. For the class, emojis are just the same as emotions, and not their textual representation. There is no difference between them, as Kim notices in this short piece: 'Little emotion came out of our interaction at least from my side (…) I was largely unattracted to him but found his personality engaging. We had interesting conversations that were largely devoid of emotion, and thus emojis, as there was little work for them to do'.

The situation becomes trickier, however, when it comes to reflecting upon the consequences of this textualization of the self. Illouz helps us again with her analysis on online dating. The first implication of forcing the self into a textual representation, she underlines, is that it is 'required to go through a vast process of reflexive self-observation, introspection, self-labeling'.[38] The online profile, profile pictures, the bio, etc. are all textual traces of the self that the latter is forced to produce in order to meet with others online. On the one hand, this makes one focus exclusively on oneself (on the fantasy of oneself, on the story we have made up about ourselves), and on one's sense of uniqueness. On the other hand, however, in order to produce these textual representations, one has, once again, to adapt to the blockbuster software that designs and controls the framework, therefore the narrative, in which we are rendered into our textual selves.

In this regard, Matthew writes an illuminating piece: 'The challenge of the importance placed on images with the swipe logic of Tinder is that few people take the time to write a biography or bio as they recognize it is unlikely it will be read. Additionally, there is the difficulty associated

with writing a bio that is attractive and unique, as we have seen the traits found attractive in terms of a romantic partner are generally standardized. Therefore, the existence of a bio ensures that attractiveness and uniqueness are mutually exclusive while encouraging users to achieve both in under 500 words. I chose not to write one at all. Perhaps it would've been easier if there were yes or no answer questions I could have responded to as they would be as standardized as the biography without the added pressure to be creative'.

Matthew, who self-identifies as queer and would explicitly talk about his sexual encounters on Tinder or Grindr during class discussions, here gives a further insight on the paradox underlined by Illouz. The textualization of the self demands a focus on one's uniqueness in order to attract more people, yet at the same time obliges to render any creative act into a pre-determined format, which is in fact a limitation of creativity in itself. Within this environment, he felt the pressure to be creative in the limited space of the bio, therefore decided not to write anything but, rather, to focus on the pictures to which he would add his own touch. He states that 'when constructing my online dating app profile, I chose photos that were flirtatious and lively, in order to accurately portray my persona. In juxtaposition with other profiles on the Tinder app, it seemed as though that my profile was too colorful compared to others, with other men having more DIY-esque photos as opposed to my lively ones…When I say "DIY" I am referring to a, for the lack of a better word, "hipster" element to some user's photos. And, in regard to "lively", I mean it in terms of being more colorful or personable than that of the prior. To further define this sentiment, it appears that some individuals choose to represent themselves in more self-made and "hip" fashion, as opposed to my overt and extroverted sense of self. My most recent interaction benefitted from this layout, because it acted as a broken barrier, showing mutual interest between the two of us.'

Finally, Matthew escaped from the constraints of the textual self by experimenting his own visual style, which apparently worked out in getting others interested in his profile. Others also wrote that, being frustrated by their failed attempts to produce a good enough, 'unique'[39] representation of themselves through the bio or profile, they finally resorted to the visual. Here Federica describes the strategy for online dating adopted by her friend E., which resonates with Illouz's remark that, by creating the illusion of 'the only real locus for thought and identity being in the mind', networked technologies put into place a process

of self-presentation and textualization where, ironically, 'physical appearance acquires a new and almost poignant importance'.[40] Federica writes: 'Since there are just a limited number of words to describe one's self, people tend to include what appear to be "essential" or basic information (in the profile). "It happened very often to read very similar descriptions, if not equal, on different profiles, and this made it difficult to choose one guy, especially because I already knew that information meant nothing at all", she said. At this point, she confessed to me that for the matches she only and exclusively relied on the physical appearance of the guys that appeared on the screen. "It was all I could do", she told me, adding "It was purely a physical thing. Appearance was all that mattered, nothing else"'.

Veronica also sheds light on the paradoxes and frustrations generated by the process of standardizing the textual self while demanding it to be unique. Discussing her friend Lucrezia's use of Tinder during an island holiday, she notices: 'She chose the pictures where she looked the nicest, and where most of her body would show; by doing so, the men she met would already know what she looked like perfectly. She wrote in her description that she was in vacation for one month and was looking for both someone to hangout, surf, go on daily trips around the island, and go out on dates with; of course, all in English. Lucrezia began to swipe for a couple of days in which she matched to around 20 guys who mostly looked all the same. They were all Australian and blonde with long hair, with a passion of surfing, and love for the ocean…'.

Obligations to abide by the rules set by the way in which the platform is designed to end up producing standardized results, i.e. the same prototype of guy replicated like in a Fordist manufacturing process. While apparently at odds with a post-modern logic of individualization, this is in fact very much in line with the neoliberal ideology of 'choice'. 'No technology I know of', writes Illouz, 'has radicalized in such an extreme way the notion of the self as a "chooser" and the idea that the romantic encounter should be the result of the best possible choice'.[41] Carried out with the mindset of the marketplace, romantic encounters become the quintessential place for competition.

Affirming the prominence of the digital over the physical as a loci of authenticity and wholeness of the self leads to a set of paradoxical conclusions. Number one, the self, devoid of the body and rendered into a cognitive-only existence, becomes textual, therefore readable, analyzable, quantifiable, commodifiable. The textual self is a market commodity

inevitably exposed to the logic, the features, and the metaphors of emotional capitalism. Nicole, in awe, writes: 'I had never realized before that the word "swiping" that Tinder has connected to online dating is in fact coming from the market…swipe your credit card, swipe the guy right or left on Tinder'.

Number two, networked technologies—especially social media—, by giving prominence to the cognitive self, only apparently liberate the individual from the constraints of the body and of physical appearance. Paradoxically, they end up rendering users hyperconscious of (and extremely dependent on) the latter as the main source of social and economic worth.[42] And, in order to be noticed and earn value within this framework, one has to comply with mechanisms of visibility that are dictated by pre-set environments, Tinder, Instagram, and the likes. One's uniqueness and creativity succumb to these mechanisms creating frustration instead. As Federica remarks: 'I only remember that the only thing my friends and I looked at were the photos, whether the boy was cute or not nice equal right, and ugly equal left. It became a mechanism that we had well embedded. I never thought about what all those guys could think when my picture appeared on their screens, or how many of them had swiped left on me. I just thought that for the first time I felt empowered to say yes or no, to decide who was the one. It feels so sad to say it now. Maybe I thought about it that way because of my extremely low self-esteem, and because of all the rejections and bullying I experienced'.

Number three, in textual-led encounters knowledge of the other precedes attraction. But do attraction and love actually come from knowledge? In reflecting about situations of physical co-presence, Erving Goffman notices that the information people 'give off' (including bodily determined information, such as posture, gaze, etc.) is more important than the information they 'freely give' to determine the direction the encounter will take, suggesting that 'much of our interactions are a sort of negotiation between what we consciously monitor, and what we have no control over'.[43] On the contrary, by overemphasizing cognitive knowledge and celebrating the textual self, networked technologies exclude other precious forms of knowledge that are performative and live-performed, sometimes crucial to determine the fate of an encounter. Nicole's piece sheds light on this very point. 'Through Tinder I matched with a male whose profile indicated he had a job, was interested in attending a business program through that job, and he loved his dog. (…) Since he had friends who attended my university I thought it would

be okay to go on a date with someone who was not in college yet. (…) When I saw him in person he looked the same as he did in his pictures (…) When he messaged me the next day to ask if we could hang out again I told him I wasn't looking to get into a relationship and unmatched with him on Tinder. There was no emotion in the real life date and I wanted more than an online relationship. Sometimes you just know when you meet someone in real life that there is no way there is going to be a second date'.

In conclusion, the class seemed to agreed with Illouz's ending remark. The protagonists of 'You've got mail' might have been their real, authentic, sweet selves in their digital version, but it's in the domain of the physical that their attraction matured and blossomed, not in aseptic web chats.

The Curated Self, or How People Feel About Phone-Calls

> '*The fact that the medium of communication was messaging allowed for a more curated conversation. We could each perfect the things we said to one another to build a person better than ourselves*' *(Natalia)*

When I first proposed the class to do what I had dubbed 'the #24hrseparation challenge', I told them, just to reassure those who looked at me horrified, panicking, surely considering me as the crazy one: 'Come on guys, this is a separation from the phone as a networked device, but you can definitively use it to make phone calls!'. I thought I would reassure them but, in fact, the atmosphere of sudden hilarity signaled that my offer had triggered a completely different reaction. 'We don't make phone calls', somebody finally took the courage to say, 'that's so old-fashioned!'. *Touché*. This is what you get when you teach young kids, long live their outspokenness!

Gen Z loves the textual self,[44] they *are* the textual self. They associate voice calls to the body, which they deem as something 'too direct' that obliges them to react on the spot, with no time to 'curate' the answer. Voice calls can't be curated, hence they should be highly avoided. In the selfie class no one answers the phone, unless it is a parent—the students forgive the mistake of being direct only to those who have generated

them. For what concerns the rest of humanity, direct contact is scientifically avoided either by not answering the phone, or by texting (mostly on Whatsapp or Instagram DM, God forbids old-school SMSs) the caller and asking for clarifications. Eventually, the voice call can take place but only after a textual negotiation, a sort of pre-curation of the conversation before it actually happens, in order to manage randomness and uncertainty.

I find this idea of 'curation' extremely fascinating. For me, having curated several art and film programs, curation resonates with the act of searching and extracting content from the information glut, and reframing it into a context that gives it an extra value and highlights its virtues. It's an act of love and care. For the selfie class, curation is something that protects them from the randomness and chaos conveyed by digital media. It is the only weapon they have to hide themselves, just a little bit, since they are condemned to be constantly on the spot, constantly monitored, constantly 'authentic', constantly themselves. Curation is their little hide-and-seek game.

As I was starting to essentialize my students' behavior, emphatic criticism came to help and rescue from the trap of building an 'us' versus 'them' situation, of blaming the abyss between generations. Because we are *all* sick beyond generations, I remembered a discussion thread that had surfaced, more or less a month before the conversation with my students, on the mailing list of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.[45] On January 28, 2019, Amanda Palmer, a singer, songwriter, and very active member of the Berkman Klein community, had started a thread on Twitter on 'how people feel about phone calls'. 'Wanna change the world? Wanna do something absolutely fucking revolutionary? It's Friday evening. Go to your contacts and call someone up – a friend, an-ex, an old co-worker – anyone you haven't talked to in a while. And DON'T TEXT THEM FIRST. Just call. You'll change the world',[46] Amanda wrote on Twitter on January 25, 2019.[47]

The response to Amanda's wake-up call was overwhelming and surprisingly revelatory of the fact that the curated self is not a 'Gen Z' obsession only. Several tropes that surfaced from my students' reactions to voice calls equally came up in the heated Twitter thread initiated by the singer. Firstly, a manifestation of anxiety, almost terror, in regard to something that obliges to a direct, performative, 'bodily' reaction.

'I do not want anyone to ever do this to me'.[48]

'No one will answer'.[49]

'Yeah, it'll change the world because you'll have no friends left'.[50]

'Worst advice of 2019. Not only I will not answer, I'll just text back with "WTF"? Leave introverts alone. That kind of aggressive social interaction is unwanted'.[51]

'I understand the sentiment, but no. The world no longer contains pleasant surprises. Unsolicited unknown number phone calls can only be bad news, politicians, or bill collectors'.[52]

I have spared the most offensive comments against Amanda's suggestion, which was perceived by many as an intrusion, an aggression against their right to be introvert, with voice calls understood as a sort of privacy infringement.

Secondly, an emphasis on curation. The voice call, exactly like for the selfie class students, can eventually happen, but only after being negotiated and curated via text first.

'If someone calls me on the phone I look at the phone until they hang up and then text them to ask them what they want'.[53]

'Not afraid. It's an intrusion. I can choose to read a text. A phone call interrupts'.[54]

'Nothing feels more isolating than having a phone call and not knowing anything to say. Always text'.[55]

'Every time someone calls me without a warning text first it's the worst thing in the world and I hate it with my life'.[56]

'What kind of monster just calls someone without texting first to see if it's ok to call?'[57]

The idea of texting first is, once again, implicitly connected to an ideology of privacy-comes-first. Not texting is perceived as an intrusion, an aggression, as if there were a sort of no-trespassing silent agreement that voice calls break in a violent way, where voice-callers become a sort of 'monsters'. Calling for merely social reasons, to care and check about someone, is not even taken into account. Sociality for sociality's sake is out of the game. You need something really important in order to call someone, and if it's 'just another ordinary day'[58] there is no reason for 'I just called to say I love you', as Stevie Wonder would sing once upon a time in the 80s.

'A lot of people have strict rules about not talking over the phone to anyone but immediate family, or in emergencies, and often this stems from social anxiety,

introversion. Imagine the awkwardness of someone on the phone cheerfully going "oh no reason, just thought I'd call!"'.[59]

What I have found truly astonishing while scrolling down the heated responses to Amanda's message is the extent to which the absolute rejection of any direct contact seems to have become hegemonic. Those tweets reveal that the fact of not making or not answering voice calls is understood by many as a shared social norm and taken as a legitimate reality not to be questioned.

'Do some people like to get phone calls? We had family movie night last night & kept laughing at the people who answered their phones'.[60]

There is something deeply ideological concerning the idea that no-voice-calls and no-direct-contact should be the 'new black'. More textualization means more data, more tracking, more mining. Voice calls fall in the domain of the performative, the ambiguous, the non-classifiable, the queer. They are definitively not welcome in the age of data capitalism. Together with being considered privacy-breakers and aggressors of the introvert self in private and social life, voice calls have now come to be widely deemed less efficient than textual communication, even in work-related situations.

The myth of efficiency has long been cultivated by productivity apps and self-time management book guides, workshops, training sessions in Silicon Valley, as the work of Melissa Gregg[61] has brilliantly underlined. Efficiency is a practice that is 'self-oriented' rather than 'other-focused', and 'renders a wide expanse of convivial activities as traps or annoyances best avoided', writes Gregg in her analysis of the ideology of the self-management of time.[62] The myth of efficiency, however, extends further productivity apps to reach the whole working environment. Here voice calls are being replaced by textual communication, including WhatsApp chats or Facebook messenger—a recent survey among US and Western European employees reveals that WhatsApp is the most used technology in the workplace[63]—, with an increasing demand to open new work-related groups on social networking platforms in the name of efficiency (test this within your own working environment).

The idea of efficiency is so hegemonic in our neoliberal times that it extends way beyond work-related situations and gets to influence other domains of people's existence across generations. Federica writes: 'Why

should I spend hours on the phone when I could just send a voice message avoiding any waste of time? Then why I feel as if when I spent hours on the phone, despite my mom's screams, everything was so much easier?'. 'WhatsApp has now replaced every kind of communication. I can express myself in a thousand different ways (photos, videos, voice messages, emoticons, gifs) and avoid the embarrassment that I felt every time during a voice call. Why then do I feel frustrated reading an answer that is ambiguous or listening to a way too long voice message? Too many times I felt the need to interrupt any written conversation because of too many misunderstandings that were taking anywhere and nowhere, provoking extreme paranoia.'

The sense of frustration registered by Federica's piece is revelatory of the extent to which the beliefs behind the efficiency of textual communication are in fact deeply ideological. On the one hand, we are made to trust that textualization saves time, gets things done quickly, and is more efficient than performative communication. On the other hand, though, the feeling that things were 'so much easier' with the phone, as Federica writes, reveals that, in fact, direct contact still plays a very crucial linguistic and social function, which is disambiguation. Textual communication reifies things, makes them have a seemingly objective existence. The textualized self lives a life of its own. Textual communication might be an efficient way of communicating data and practical information, i.e., details of a meeting place, an upcoming trip, etc., but how about mediating a dispute via text (any text, including a visual one)? How about texting to solve a professional, or even personal problem that would require mediation, negotiation? The ambiguity of textual communication generates a fertile ground for feelings of anxiety, frustration, even paranoia, to thrive, as Susanna Paasonen highlights in her brilliant analysis of a heated Facebook conversation around clubbing and gender identities, which the use of emojis contributed to escalate rather than solve.[64]

Textual communication is not as efficient as we are ideologically inclined to think. Not only it does not help to save time, but very often it makes us socially awkward. The curated self is obsessed by textual communication. It carefully avoids the slightest form of direct, performative communication, like a voice call, with the ideological justification of protecting (neoliberal) values such as the right to privacy, and the imperative of efficiency. Avoiding direct contact is not a private business of Gen Z, but something that concerns all of us. It is not a generational issue, but rather an issue of class and power in the age of communicative capitalism.

'Human contact is now a luxury good', announced The New York Times in March 2019. 'Life for anyone but the very rich—the physical experience of learning, living, and dying—is increasingly mediated by screens. Conspicuous human interaction—living without a phone for a day, quitting social networks, and not answering email—has become a status symbol'.[65] The wealthy ones can afford to live without screens and networked connections, but the working class is unlikely to leave any time soon the hyper-mediated life that makes work-related and personal things apparently 'easier' and 'more efficient' while enslaving us. Underneath the ideology of efficiency and the right to privacy upon which the curated, textual self thrives, a power and class-related issue is being concealed. Under the spell of this ideological chimera, we engage in discussions about having more automation, more artificial intelligence, more textualization at the working place and in daily life, while an increasing 'luxurification of human engagement'[66] is slowly in the making. And that's not a kids-only business.

The Hooked-Up Self, or the #24hrSeparation Challenge

> *'This experiment scared me. Not because I believe that social media, the internet and my phone are so necessary to my day to day life but rather because they are innate. This may not be healthy but it's true. The moment the idea of going 24 hours without my phone I tried to imagine simply what my morning would look like, I was unable to. This sent me into a panic' (Natalia)*

When I started the selfie class, I asked the students to spend an hour scrolling down on Instagram or any other social platform, and then report about the experience. Hardly any of them was able to recall what kind of content, news, or information they had been exposed to. Their mind was like a blank space. They were so overwhelmed by the platform and its mesmerizing environment that they had completely forgot the message. They couldn't think about anything content-related, let alone the emotions they had experienced. They were just immersed in the flow. The medium was the message.

Around mid-semester I asked them for a bolder move: to take a step back from the flow for 24 hours. I called this experiment 'the #24hrseparation challenge', and it seems to me, judging from their pieces, that the students took it as one of those challenges that once in a while go crazy viral on the Internet. They were frustrated by the idea of being separated for such a long time from their beloved networked devices, however at the same time they felt a kind of fearful excitement in trying something they would never attempt to do unless obliged to. The idea that this constituted a 'homework', a duty, something they had to do for their final grade, gave them a sort of relief that it was not their choice to try such a weird, a-social thing. Many of them freaked out, not everyone was able to complete the experiment, but I told them that it was fine just to try to do it, and then write about why they had not been able to carry on until the end.

All of them have written incredibly inspiring pieces that unfortunately, for the lack of space, I cannot transcribe here. Yet I will try to sum up some of the themes emerging from their writings, in order to inspire future discussions about what is so compelling, enticing, addictive about these networked devices that hooks them (us) up, making them (us) feel 'withdrawal symptoms' when the 'black box' is taken away and obliging them (us) to 'bargain' to get it back as soon as possible; or preventing them (us) from doing 'normal' things, like remembering to drink water or going to the toilet without having their legs 'atrophied' for sitting for too long while scrolling down.

Boredom is a cursed status that, judging from the accounts of the separation, connected devices provide an antidote to. Smartphones satisfy our voracious thirst, our 'constant quest for experience'.[67] They open up to an existence marked by the eventfulness of the digital as opposed to the insignificance and triteness of organic life. As Federica writes: 'Many times, during moments of boredom, the only thing I can do is take the phone, unlock it with a simple and smooth gesture, open Instagram and scroll down to infinity ad beyond. It's easy, I'm always logged in. Double click. Scroll down. Swipe up. Reload, and repeat. Time flies away'.

Yet, at the same time, the digital existence itself can become a routine. Logging in, reading notifications, answering comments, sharing posts, liking pictures, all those online activities that protect from offline boredom might also turn into ordinary operations to be performed over and over again on a daily basis: 'tasks', like most of the class called

them, associating them with monotony and triteness.[68] The #24hourseparation challenge has made apparent this double-edged sword aspect of networked technologies, the latter's almost human quality to oscillate between eventfulness and insignificance, the extraordinary and the expected; the drug-like attribute of providing excitement and frustration, of giving ups and downs in a very short time span. As Anna remarks: 'To be honest, the actual tasks that I do with my phone, such as scroll the Instagram feed for hours, send streaks, or text people are just a way for me to keep myself entertained, but these tasks almost never excite me. Sometimes I even force myself to do these tasks as an obligation of scrolling the feed to like the pictures of my friends, and send streaks as a daily responsibility, or text people as a way of communicating. But these tasks don't make me feel emotionally happy. So when I was doing the 24-hour separation, it did not bother me that I wasn't aware of the new posts on Instagram, and the new Instagram stories that I haven't watched yet. In fact when I broke the challenge and was finally able to check all my streaks, to respond to my messages, and to scroll my Instagram feed, I didn't feel the joy and the happiness of doing these things'.

Anxiety is a feeling that transpires from many accounts of the #24hourseparation challenge. Anxiety is generated by FOMO, 'the fear or missing out, resulting in a constant desire for engagement with others and with the world'.[69] Students freaked out about disconnecting because they thought this would isolate them from their network of sociality which would eventually push them to 'fade into the background'[70] and make them forgotten, even if just for one day. Frustration occurred when they realized that disconnecting for a day would go mostly unnoticed by many of their friends. Federica accounts of this feeling: 'I was able to complete the experiment. But the euphoria I felt when switching on the Wi-Fi soon turned into frustration. I had not received so many messages as I thought or expected, on the contrary. Not even a simple "Hey" to say "hey are you there? are you still alive?"'.

Finally, speed. The speed of social platforms, their quality of being bottomless, spaceless, timeless, the never-ending flow of information, can no longer be understood and processed by our brains, as they exceed human capacity.[71] That kind of speed belongs to post-human and transhuman entities; as for what concerns us, physically limited individuals with specific organic needs, we do not have the capacity to follow the rhythm of the machine-led flow of emotions and data, therefore we are frustrated for not being smart enough or quick enough to catch up with the digital.

In this Sisyphean search we all feel inadequate, we all feel like living in loops, looking for something that we can never fully grasp. We rather blame ourselves as individuals for not being able to cope with the situation, instead of blaming the mechanism of power behind our 'burnout society'.[72]

And we don't even have the luxury of switching off, because 'something' might happen when we are disconnected that we will regret. Our happy accident: our new love, an amazing job opportunity, the trip of our life, our ranking on Academia.edu. Whatever we care for. Speed is the ideology of our neoliberal times. We cannot disconnect, we cannot slow down. The self must be hooked-up, and, as Federica sadly remarks, 'the only thing that should not have an end is the internet'.

Conclusion: Can We Politicize Networked Emotions?

> *'I want to learn to just leave my phone in my pocket and try to engage with the world around me. I want to read the books I've been wanting to read for so long, take more trips, go on more adventures. Do all of these things for the fun of them, and for the memories, not for the pictures which I will post on Instagram and gain likes from. Not for the sake of having my followers see where I am through my Instagram stories. I want to live life, the real kind of life. The life which leaves you fulfilled and restless, it leaves you wanting more and more' (Veronica)*

We are *all* sick. The textual self, the curated self, the hooked-up self are features that do not emerge exclusively from the frustrations of digital natives. Rather, they constitute our collective facial traits; they are the self-portrait of these neoliberal, hyper-connected times. Empathic criticism suggests that fantasies of efficiency, the right to privacy, and speed, inspire and influence the collective, societal approach to networked technologies, not just the behavior of a generation.

We are all sick, yet does the fact that this 'sickness' has spread to the whole society allow us to deem ourselves *not* sick at all? Should we pretend that this does not exist only because it has reached a mass dimension? As long as feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness, depression, stay relegated in the domain of the personal, they will be understood as specific 'disabilities', and their burden will be carried by individuals blaming

themselves for not being able to cope with the requirements of the hyper-connected contemporary life. With the help of empathic criticism, however, we can dissect the mechanism underneath the manufacturing of these emotions and unveil their quality of machine-generated feelings. It is not about the sadness, anxiety, depression, that we used to experience prior to the digital. These are not like pre-networked emotions, but completely new entities. The 'sickness' we experience is generated by an environment that is 'sad by design', as Geert Lovink's brilliantly suggests; a software engineered and designed to produce these feelings *by default*. These aren't flaws in the system but, rather, features of the system that are expressively engineered to nurture its political economy and make communicative capitalism thrive.

What do we do to counter-act this beast that we do not even fully understand? Is it just a binary choice between conforming to the new social, or rather—in the ultimate, elitist, self-referential, neo-colonial gesture—#deleteFacebook #deleteInstagram, delete all social platforms? Is there a way to turn these machine-generated feelings from social stigmas into catalysts for a productive and progressive collective action? It seems that the wasteland of networked feelings has been abandoned by progressive politics and left free to be ravaged and re-appropriated by white supremacists, fascists, racists, and the alt-right. When not so, it serves as the playground of marketing specialists and sentiment analysis to engineer new products and commodities, must-do Internet challenges, viral obsessions, and trends that ought to fade away as quickly as they have surfaced.

Why does the so-called progressive left not want to engage with this? As if entering the treacherous domain of the emotions and get our hands dirty with the tricks of our subconscious would undermine political credibility, and overthrow the triumvirate rule of reason, dialogue, and deliberation, condemning us to be haunted forever by our Habermasian ghosts. It is time to leave our Frankfurt school too-heavy-to-carry burden behind us and take critical theory with us in a renewed form. It is not World War II, nor Nazi-fascist Europe, although there are way too many scary similarities with that wretched time. Our attitude should change, though, if we want to engage with our own wretched, hyper-connected time. We should not be afraid to visit the haunted place where networked feelings live and mess up with them. We are already messed up anyways (raise your hand if you're not). We should carry the lesson of critical theory into the networked millennium.

The job of critical theory in the new millennium is no longer and not only to merely point the finger against surveillance capitalism, data mining, and the ways in which social platforms predate us and turn us into commodities. Federica acknowledges: 'I know every move we take is strictly monitored 24/7. I perfectly know that Big Brother is watching us, but sometimes, I can feel serenity and comfort in the small affective gestures that social media allow us to do'. We should treasure these little gems the new generation gives us, and work on these 'small affective gestures that social media allow us to do', exploring the possibility of having them blossom into something wider, collective, and political.

Notes

1. This essay is built upon a selection of auto-ethnographic pieces authored by the students of my 'Selfies and Beyond: Exploring Networked Identity' class, held at John Cabot University in Spring 2019. In order to protect their anonymity and, at the same time, credit the students for their wonderful work, I have given them fictional names.
2. Lovink (2019).
3. Karppi (2015).
4. Raymond Williams (2001, 65).
5. Fuchs (2014, 269).
6. Gramsci (1971, 276).
7. On auto-ethnography see Ellis et al. (2011), Ellis (2004), Tombro (2016).
8. The class was designed together with my colleague at John Cabot University, professor Peter Sarram, the idea originating from the conference 'Fear and Loathing of the Online Self' co-organized by us, Geert Lovink and Teresa Numerico, in May 2017, at the John Cabot and Roma Tre campuses. From now on, I will call it 'the selfie class'.
9. 'Empathy' is a concept very much at the center, together with 'care', of feminist scholarship. For an overview on the use of this scholarship in the context of communicative capitalism and media studies, see Della Ratta (2020).
10. The syllabus is available here. https://myjcu.johncabot.edu/syllabus/syllabus_print.aspx?IDS=12179.
11. See Della Ratta (2020).
12. Done anonymously, unless the author of the piece would spontaneously come out to do public remarks.
13. Ellis et al. (2011).
14. The excerpts used in this essay belong to six 'media experiments'—*'My (digital) self & I…& the subconscious'*; *'To gift or not to gift'*; *'The*

#24hrseparation challenge'; 'Digital Abstinence walkabouts'; 'Love, like.. or not'; 'Self on Selfie'—performed throughout the semester by the students.
15. Dean (2005).
16. See Bowles (2019).
17. Here I am playing with the title of John Longwalker and Geert Lovink's performance held at Transmediale 2020. https://2020.transmediale.de/content/we-are-not-sick-john-longwalker-geert-lovink.
18. Petit (2015, 177–178), my emphasis.
19. Petit (2015, 178).
20. On 'affect' see Massumi (2002).
21. Petit (2015).
22. Illouz (2007, 74).
23. Terms used during class discussion.
24. Originally published on The New Yorker, 5 July 1993.
25. Widely used acronym to shorten the expression 'In-real-life'.
26. Storr (2019, 141), emphasis in the original.
27. Storr offers an interesting historical overview.
28. He is widely acknowledged to have coined the expression 'web 2.0' in a seminal blog post from 2005. See O'Reilly (2005).
29. Facebook (2019).
30. Frier (2017).
31. Robbins (2018).
32. Storr (2019, 42).
33. 2012.
34. Quoted by Storr.
35. Quoted by Storr, my emphasis.
36. Quoted in De Angelis and Della Ratta (2014).
37. Illouz (2007, 78).
38. Illouz (2007, 77).
39. That is the word most of them used in class discussions and in their texts.
40. Illouz (2007, 81).
41. Illouz (2007, 79).
42. See also Illouz (2007, 81).
43. Quoted by Illouz (2007, 9).
44. Bradbury (2017, 7).
45. Being well aware that the conversations on the mailing list remain private, I will just report the public exchanges that took place on Twitter. I want to thank the Berkman Klein community for being so inspiring and insightful in discussing digital media culture.
46. Capital letters are in the original.
47. The thread has generated 392 retweets and 2.800 likes. https://twitter.com/amandapalmer/status/1088947454475730944?s=21.
48. @hughcasey 28 january.

49. @Kablooo 26 january.
50. @logainne 27 january.
51. @NotYourIngenue 27 january.
52. @brevemike 26 january.
53. @prosateuse 26 january.
54. @MellyG14 26 january.
55. @shutdownSETI 27 january.
56. @Meagolas january 26.
57. @revanisrindr january 27.
58. Lyrics from 'I just called to say I love you', Stevie Wonder (1984).
59. @SFF180 26 january.
60. @nelldelaney7 26 january.
61. See for example Gregg (2015, 2018).
62. Gregg (2015, 187).
63. See McQuire (2018). My own ethnography with friends and colleagues also shows a widespread use of WhatsApp groups and Facebook chats for work-related issues.
64. See Paasonen (2015).
65. Bowles (2019).
66. The New York Times.
67. Lovink (2019).
68. For example: 'Before doing anything else and starting my day, the first thing I will do is open my phone in the morning and monotonously scroll through the photos and tweets of the night before'.
69. Lovink (2019).
70. A student's expression.
71. Levitin (2015).
72. Han (2015).

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Entr’acte 3

Yes in Disguise

Simon Boas and Kris Blackmore

The widespread willingness of users to share their deeply personal and often controversial beliefs through networked digital platforms offers opportunities for targeted conversations on sensitive cultural issues. As users of networked devices and services, we voluntarily externalize many aspects of our personalities as online data. The sprawling data that comprises our online selves can expose security flaws in our social values. Artists can appropriate data that has been shared publicly but is buried under layers of social networking noise to disrupt regressive cultural norms.

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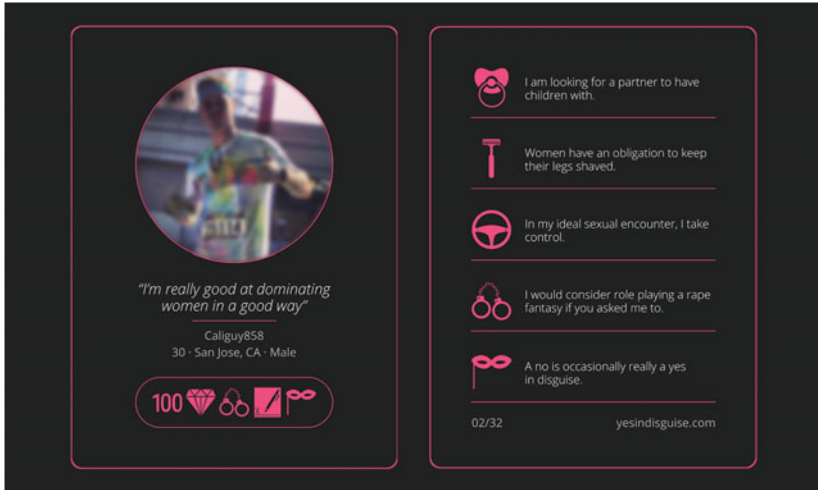
Women have an obligation to keep their legs shaved.
I enjoy meaningless sex.
I feel there are
which you are
with me.
I would consider
on our first date.
I could maybe have
after having sex with you.
first date.



The way men describe their views on sexual consent and gender roles in dating apps provides a focused example.

The popular OkCupid dating website holds a great deal of information about heterosexual male users and their views on women and sexual consent. All that's required to access this data is a female profile, which anyone can easily create. The site collects most of this data through hundreds of multiple-choice "Match Questions" designed to produce highly compatible potential dates for its users. At the time we created this project, there were two Match Questions among the hundreds on OkCupid that were explicitly about sexual consent:

1. The user is prompted with the statement "No means NO!" and presented with the following answer choices: (A) "Always. Period." (B) "Mostly, occasionally it's really a Yes in disguise." (C) "A No is just a Yes that needs a little convincing!" (D) "Never, they all want me. They just don't know it."
2. The user is asked, "Do you feel there are any circumstances in which a person is obligated to have sex with you?" with "Yes" or "No" as answer choices.

The answer choices to these questions inherently reduce a gradient of human views and experiences to a small number of discrete categories

and oversimplify a complex cultural issue. However, the questions' presence on OkCupid—and their optional nature—resulted in various men voluntarily tagging themselves as holding harmful views toward women.

We were interested in the profiles of men who had given any answer besides "Always. Period." to the first question or the answer "Yes" to the second. The core of "Yes in Disguise" was a Python script that searched through nearby OkCupid profiles to find men who have chosen those answers. From there, the script checked their answered Match Questions for any other regressive statements about women and sex. If it found at least five, it downloaded those statements along with a curated sample of their data, including their profile photo, user name, and city of residence. From that data we produced a limited edition of printed trading cards that dissolves the illusion of privacy and gives weight to digital expressions of misogyny, whether they be indirect or explicit.

This is a process that could have been accomplished without algorithmic assistance, but the script allowed us to comb through thousands of profiles in a fraction of the time it would take to do so manually. The script also did not discriminate like we might have if we were making the selections ourselves. Some of the men whose profiles we turned into trading cards arguably have been mischaracterized in this project; there is often tension between their answers to the Match Questions we targeted and the rest of their profiles. This tension is by design: Misogyny has many faces. It is often deeply internalized and a symptom of broader cultural issues.

"Yes in Disguise" is an exercise in social hacking. The data representing the personal views on sexual consent of many men is technologically but not culturally vulnerable. Conversations about consent do not always happen at the appropriate time. This project pushes those conversations beyond the safety of the screen and calls out men for perpetuating sexual violence via their online selves.

Faces in images have been obscured for publication.

This project received funding from the University of California, Santa Cruz's Art Dean's Fund for Excellence. See more of this work at www.yesindisguise.com.

Automated Queer Desire

Francisco Gonzalez-Rosas

Visually, a queer dating app is a grid where horizontal and vertical lines display one picture next to the other. Their use, creation of a profile, and the interactions enabled there—are essentially an exercise of repetition. This technological systematization and standardization of desire is the main inspiration for "Dating for Export," an earlier work during my MFA studio research. This video piece stages a selfie session inspired by many of the visualities produced and enacted in these platforms: attempts at 90's Calvin Klein underwear advertisements mixed with current publicity of Marco Marco, and any other brand focused on gay consumers; fetish items such as leather, latex, puppy masks, harnesses, slings, military boots, chains over pectorals, perhaps a hat resembling the army/navy… sports gear and countless mirror selfies, innumerable torsos, gym selfies and cropped biceps. A sophisticated pose has also been performed since Antiquity; a folded arm lays gracefully between the side and back of the head. Equally loved by Roman emperors and twenty-something Instagram boys-next-door. Hashtag Caravaggio: face the camera with a slight bend of the neck to raise your chin up.

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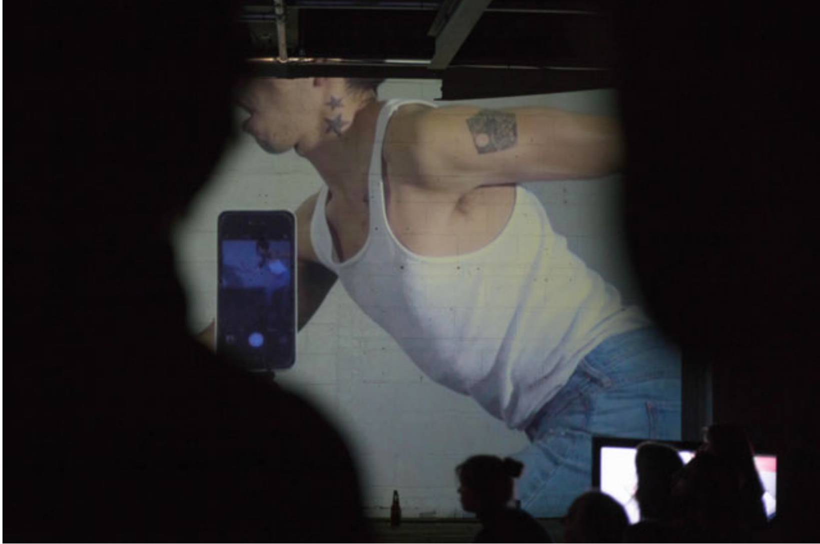

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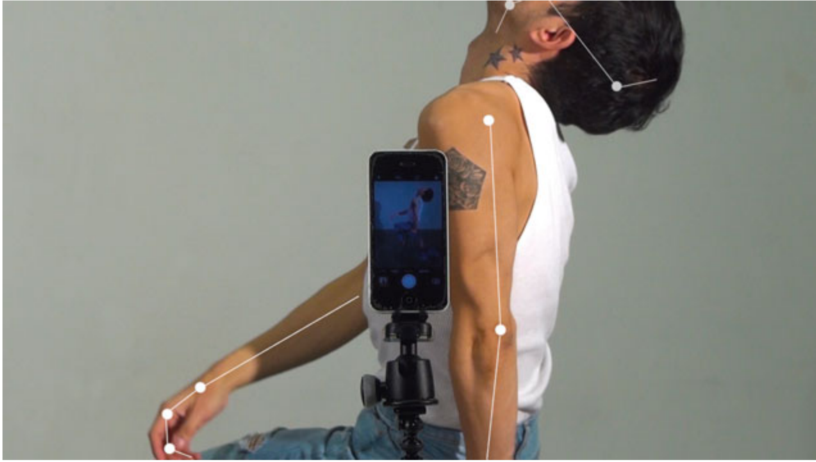

The image produced in geo-located queer networks, with its juxtaposition of references, accurately resonates with Austrian media theorist Bernadette Wegenstein's body conceptualization. Paraphrasing her, this body is the result of the twentieth century's advancements in psychoanalysis, cognitive science/artificial intelligence, and phenomenology (2016). The conditions that enable the twenty-first-century body are characterized by the liberation of the individual from explicit economic and political bondage to macro power structures. This hyper-communicated body, outsourced to technological devices, owes its sense of freedom to consumer society and a capitalist emphasis on hedonism, desire, and enjoyment. A specific focus on the beautiful body has been promoted through Hollywood and the norm-regulating media of mass communication. Individuality, emotion, and interpersonal intimacy become the principal criteria of self-realization. At once individual property and personal construction, the body has become a "project" to be worked on and represents a fundamental aspect of the individual's self-identity (2016).

One of the pioneers of the representation and study of queer visual culture was American photographer Hal Fisher. At the end of the '70s, Fisher published *Gay Semiotics*, a *catalogue* of gay iconography and the archetypes involved in male fantasy that he captured from the everyday streets and nightlife of San Francisco. In his view, gay culture is arranged around stereotypes, as an accumulation of cultural elements taken from

different sources that, combined, create the effect of desire (2015). These items can be considered neutral in relation to culture at large—stereotypical images of masculinity embedded within collective consciousness and mainstream media—but twisted toward the sexual fetish in gay culture. In archeology of male objectification, images of James Dean or Marlon Brando work as pivotal points of fantasy development which continue informing current porn and erotica. Mainstream tropes such as the innocent twink, the macho, the muscular fitness body, the daddy–son relationship. Films such as *Querelle* by Reiner Werner Fassbinder or Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice*, or the drawings by Tom of Finland can be considered as the visual templates of contemporary queer culture, synthesized and obsessively repeated as identity clues in the digital landscape.

The subject, its visual expression and ways of communication are produced through reiteration of self-reflection and desire. The contemporary queer male body is a medium where aggregations of performative body images are the metonymy of social practices and behaviors.

Joshua Simon, Israeli academic, writer and curator applies Marxist knowledge to the analysis of social networks. For Simon, rather than a form of self-promotion, these are a form of labor outside of employment (2016). A person can be unemployed yet generates value by means of their subjectivity, in the ability to socialize through channels managed by corporations. Social networks are punch clocks where the self makes itself present like an employee swipes her card after the lunch break. Most interestingly, Simon questions the alleged disappearance of the assembly line—the prime characteristic of the Fordist economy, where every worker repeats one specific task, continually. "If the protocols of production are broken down, only the right hand is needed to execute twenty different jobs on the assembly line, and then two hands to do twenty more and then legs on five more, etc., etc. The body is cut limb by limb" (2016). Just like the techno-machineries we use today, that use parts and display parts, every time we connect and self-expose. The assembly line lives in the corporeal performances and self-images distributed through mobile networks. In the case of queer networks, these images also become a game that bounces the self back and forth. Users embody their body-design while performing their sexual desire.

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Mask, Anonymity and Visibility

Reconsidering Anonymity and Anonymous in the Age of Narcissism

Gabriella Coleman

To All the Names in History, the Time has Come to Sacrifice that Name
—Anonymous (Manifesto *of the Anonymous Nomad*)

Ego *&* fame *are by default, inherently contradictory to anonymity. The tallest blade of grass gets cut first. Remain unknown. Be* #Anonymous.
—Anonymous (@YourAnonNews) April 16, 2012

To be online—whether chatting, gaming, playing, wasting time, building, advocating, clicking or click baiting, reading, watching, listening, outraging, protesting, or hacking—is also an occasion to develop and experiment with new selves, socialities, and ethical relations. This was certainty the case with Anonymous, a far-flung global protest movement that became famous for its dramatic hacks and leaks. Less familiar but as important is that Anonymous was also predicated on the idea that cloaked identities could be put to work fighting for justice by enabling truth-telling *and* disabling celebrity-seeking behaviors. Anonymity became a zone for participants to live out an ethical commitment to group

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solidarity, as it became involved in or launched hundreds of political operations during its vibrant, brief tenure of existence.

While initially used by nameless trolls coordinating one-off harassment escapades across the internet, the Anonymous moniker took on new meaning in 2008, as participants identifying with the label engaged in a staggering array of hacks and political operations designed for media uptake.[1] A couple of years later, in 2011, activity under the name, which was coordinated by dozens of nodes and groups around the world, erupted. Figures identifying as Anonymous used their technical know-how and trollish sense of media spectacle to call for a moratorium on Japanese and Norwegian whaling; demand justice for victims of sexual assault and police brutality, sometimes by revealing the names of alleged perpetrators; hack governments and corporations alike; assist the occupations in Egypt, Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, and North America; support the Syrian uprising; dox police officers who pepper-sprayed protesters; expose pedophiles online; and even provide clothing to the homeless. News outlets came to count on Anonymous for a steady stream of sensational stories. One affiliated crew called LulzSec devoted itself to delivering a new "hack-a-day" for 50 days. As they infiltrated Sony Pictures, published fake news on PBS' website, and snatched emails from the Arizona Public Safety organization, they served up fodder to the press even as they gleefully self-reported their exploits on social media to a growing and satisfied fan base. "In the last few weeks these guys have picked up around 96,000 Twitter followers. That's 20,000 more than when I looked yesterday. Twitter has given LulzSec a stage to show off on, and showing off they are,"[2] wrote one security researcher. Anonymous managed to court even more controversy with ritualized stunts like "FUCK FBI FRIDAY," which saw the hacktivists take to Twitter at the end of each week and taunt the agency tasked with snuffing its members out.

For an anthropologist who studies the cultures of hacking, it was an exhilarating moment; I was glued to my seat. But as that exemplary moment passed, Anonymous' trajectory veered toward the ironic, and ultimately even tragic, as the core participants were betrayed by an informant and arrested. The name began to lend itself to military operations—such as the anti-terrorism campaigns in service of the nation-state, for instance—that many of its earlier members would have at times vehemently opposed.[3]

I was never so naive to believe that Anonymous could (or should) be our saviors. My take was more humble. I mostly marveled at the way

these masked dissenters embraced anonymity not only for truth-telling but also as a moral code to ward off social peacocking behaviors. They sought to motivate participants into silent solidarity rather than individual credit-seeking, even as they sought collective publicity for their epic hacks, pranks, and protests. It certainly helped that Anonymous contributed to a number of political causes I supported, such as Occupy Wall Street, the outing of creepy surveillance firms, and struggles against government corruption. Indeed, Anonymous flickered most intensely between 2011 and 2015, during a tumultuous period of global unrest and discontent, evident in a range of large-scale popular uprisings across the world: the 15-M movement in Spain, the Arab and African Springs, the Occupy encampments, the student movement in Chile, Black Lives Matter, and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, with Anonymous contributing to every one of these campaigns. Their deep entanglement with some of these broader social causes has been commemorated by many who worked with or benefited from Anonymous. In 2011, a photo was shared widely of Tunisian children in Germany sitting in their school's courtyard, donning white paper cut-out Guy Fawkes masks, a gesture of gratitude to Anonymous for bringing the message of their plight to the world. More recently, consider the untimely death of Erica Garner, an anti-police brutality activist, and daughter of Eric Garner, a man who died at the hands of a NYPD officer. Not long after her passing, the person fielding her Twitter account paid their respects to Anonymous: "Shout out to Anonymous… One of the first groups of people that held Erica down from jump street. She loved y'all for real #opicantbreathe."[4]

I appreciated that groups of people were taking up the mantle of anonymity largely for good—even if it seemed it might be for one last time before anonymity itself dissipated for good. Indeed, the reign of Anonymous exploded right when it was becoming harder to imagine an online future that included privacy and anonymity. This was a time when Silicon Valley executives had already built out the digital infrastructure of surveillance capitalism[5] and defending it by casting privacy as morally dubious. For instance, when a reporter asked Google's Eric Schmidt whether we should entrust our data to them, his patronizing response was calculated to eliminate any positive valence to privacy: "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place."[6]

My pessimism about the viability of anonymity and privacy to survive (much less thrive) still generally overpowers my optimism. But even as the

glory days of Anonymous waned, and even as online platforms continue to amass and sell our data, a slightly more muscular privacy and anonymity movement finally coalesced. Thanks in part to Edward Snowden's massive leak of NSA documents, which provided much more substantial proof of government surveillance and its cooperation with the private sector than had previously existed, a battle to preserve privacy and anonymity is now vigorously being waged.[7] Shortly after the Snowden disclosures, numerous hacker-driven technology projects, galvanized by his exposé, continue to develop the sort of privacy-enhancing tools that journalists, domestic violence victims, human rights workers, and political dissidents now rely on to move through the world more securely. These tools are easier to use and more secure than ever. Whereas five years ago I struggled to recommend simple security tools to friends and family, today I can point to Signal (an encrypted texting and phone application), the Tor Browser (which anonymizes web traffic), and half a dozen other applications—each of which have garnered increased funding and volunteers thanks to increased scrutiny of state and corporate privacy violations. Even Google was moved to instantiate strict end-to-end encryption of their services, ensuring the data they continue to rely on to fuel their commercial enterprise would not be so readily available to others. Existing policy, technology, and advocacy organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Fight for the Future, the Library Freedom Project, Big Brother Watch, and Privacy International have also helped ensure that privacy remains a marquee political issue.

As a member of a loose confederacy of surveillance critics, I routinely give lectures about why we should fight for the right to privacy, as I also explain anonymity's vital role in underwriting democratic processes like voting, dissent, and whistle-blowing. Surveillance thwarts the desire and the capacity to enable privacy and anonymity. In the course of this proselytizing, it has become apparent that anonymity is often harder—much harder—to defend than other related civil liberties like free speech and privacy. Part of the problem concerns a lack of public clarity over the value of anonymity, how it is different from privacy, and what cloaking can do for democratic processes. While privacy—the right and ability to carve out zones of sanctuary free from surveillance and control what information is known about you—has been defended on numerous grounds and articulated in law, statutes, and legal theory for well over a century, anonymity—the right and ability to act, speak, or associate in a group without having to reveal your identity—has been far less developed. This

sparsity is also evident in academic or theoretical expositions over the role of anonymity in enabling a range of democratic processes from voting to dissent, as political theorist Hans Asenbaum has argued in one of the most hefty defenses of cloaking to date.[8]

Still, even as theorists are addressing and eliminating this lacuna, the problem runs far deeper. It's not just that people can easily intuit privacy, while they lack examples or a vocabulary to conceptualize, much less defend anonymity. Privacy is nearly always packaged and perceived as a public good, while anonymity, in contrast, is more often packaged and regarded as a private vice that often leads to public mayhem.

Indeed, justifying anonymity becomes extraordinarily tricky because it suffers from a very poor reputation—likely made worse due to a class of online social dynamics that have come to stand as a proxy for the inherently corrupting nature of online anonymity: some of the most publicized and well-known uses of anonymity online, like online comments, tend toward the toxic. Numerous newspapers in recent years have eliminated these forums, reigned them in, or reconfigured them, attentive to the ways they often fail to engender civil discourse and instead breed more hateful and harmful speech. Anonymity similarly enables trolls on social media to dodge accountability as they viciously attack (mostly) people of color, women, and the genderqueer.[9]

The negative connotations that many have of anonymity is evident in their perception of what journalists and scaremongers call the "dark web." When I ask my students what they think happens there, many describe it as the most sinister corner of the net, infested by menacing pervy types who hack bile onto our devices, which festers and erupts into mini volcanoes of stolen passports, cocaine, and child porn. Some even believe that being anonymous online is tantamount—in every instance—to trawling the dark web. The metaphor of darkness has worked to implant nefarious and inaccurate pictures in their mind, and so I counter with a different image.

Since my students have little understanding of how anonymity works, first, I explain that far from being a binary choice like a light switch that turns off and on, anonymity typically involves an assortment of options and gradients. Many people conceal themselves by name alone, contributing online with a screen name, alias, nickname, avatar, or with no attribution at all, "anonymous." This social anonymity concerns public attribution alone and shields a participant's legal name while identifying information, like a IP address, may still visible to a network observer,

such as the system administrator running the site where content is posted. There is also no single God-like anonymity tool providing omnipotent, trustworthy, dependable, goof-proof protection with the capacity to hide every digital track, scramble all network traffic and envelop all content into a shell of encryption. Far from it: flawless technical anonymity is considered a demanding and exacting art that can occasion the loss of sleep for even the most elite hackers. A user seeking out functional anonymity must patch together an assortment of tools, and the result will be a more or less sturdy quilt of protection, determined by the tools and the skill of the user. Depending on which and how many tools are used, this quilt of protection might conceal all identifying information, or just some essential elements: the content of exchanged messages, an originating IP address, web browser searches, or the location of a server.

Since they are already familiar with its vices, I transition to explain its virtues. The same anonymity, I continue, that can be used by the criminal or bully and harasser can also be a "weapon of the weak," relied on by ordinary people, voters, whistleblowers, victims of abuse, the chronically ill, and activists to express controversial political opinions, share sensitive information, organize themselves, provide armor against state repression, and build sanctuaries of support. Indeed, as James Scott, whose work has extensively dealt with the concept of the "weapons of the weak" has usefully noted, "[w]hen it is impossible to conceal who precisely is talking, resistance must often be muffled and indirect, like the inarticulate mumbling and grumbling of a subordinate who fears to venture a clear dissent. But, when the resister can hide behind anonymity, the voice can be clear and bold."[10]

Fortunately, there is no shortage of examples illuminating the benefits derived from the protection of anonymity. Patients, parents, and survivors gather on internet forums, like Urban Mom, to discuss sensitive topics using anonymous aliases, allowing for frank, "clear and bold" discussions of what might otherwise be stigmatizing subjects. Domestic abuse victims spied on by their abusers can technically cover their digital tracks and search for information about shelters with the Tor Browser. Whistleblowers are empowered today to protect themselves like never before, given the availability of digital dropboxes, such as SecureDrop, located on what is called onion, or hidden servers. These dropoff points, which facilitate the anonymous sharing of information, are now hosted by dozens of established journalism venues from the *Guardian* to the *Washington Post*. Hosting data on onion services only accessible via Tor is

a remarkably effective mechanism to counter state-sponsored repression and censorship. For example, Iranian activists critical of the government shielded their databases by making them only available as onion services. This architecture makes it so the government can seize the publicly known web server, but they cannot find the server providing the content from the database. By making the webservers disposable, the content is protected, and the site with information directed at empowering activists can reappear online quickly, forcing would-be government censors instead to play a game of whack-a-mole. Relying on a suite of anonymity technologies, hacktivists can safely ferret out politically consequential information by transforming themselves into untraceable ghosts; for example, one group anonymously infiltrated white supremacist chat rooms after the tragic murder of Heather Heyer and swiped the logs detailing the workings of hate groups organizing for the Charlottesville rally as well as their vile reactions and infighting.[11]

Despite bearing the name "Anonymous," the importance, uses, and meaning around anonymity within this activist entity are less straightforward than my earlier examples. This confusion might partly stem from the fact that Anonymous is sociologically bewildering. Their name is a shared alias that is free for the taking by anyone, what Marco Deseriis defines as an "improper name."[12] Radically available to everyone, such a label comes endowed with a built-in susceptibility for adoption, circulation, and mutation. The public was often unaware of who they were, how they worked, and how to reconcile their distinct operations and tactics. There were hundreds of operations that had no relation to each other and were often ideologically out of alignment with each other—some firmly in support of liberal democracy, others seeking to destroy the liberal state in favor of anarchist forms of governance, others using vigilante or hacking tactics, with others residing staying clear of illegality. It's for also this reason that "Anonymous is not unanimous" became a famous quip among participants used to remind onlookers of its decentralized, leaderless character and signal the existence of disagreements over tactics and political beliefs.

For these reasons, they were not just anonymous, but cryptic, making it in fact hard to judge them and their uses of anonymity. For members of the public, as well as my students, their assessment of Anonymous often depended on their reaction to any one of the hundreds of operations they might have come across; their perception of the Guy Fawkes figure; and other idiosyncrasies like their take on vigilante justice or direct action. While some spectators adored their willingness to actually stick it

to the man, others were horrified by their readiness to break the law with such impunity. Amid a cacophony of positions on Anonymous, I invariably encountered one category of person loath to endorse Anonymous: the lawful, good type (academic law professors or liberal policy wonks, for instance), nearly always skeptical and dismayed at the entirety of Anonymous because of a small number of vigilante justice operations carried out under its mantle.[13] That people who embrace anonymity for the purposes of acting (and not simply speaking), especially when such actions skirt due process or the rule of law, are by default shady characters because anonymity tends to nullify accountability and thus responsibility; that the mask is itself a kind of incarnated lie, sheltering cowards who simply cannot be trusted, and who are not accountable to the communities they serve. The strange thing was the way those lawful types aligned with a smaller, but vocal, class of left activists also skeptical of Anonymous for similar reasons. Some were keen to support direct action maneuvers but full of reservations when they were carried out by this anonymous collective they viewed with suspicion not only for their lack of accountability but also lack of ideological coherence or purity.

But these arguments ignore the varied and righteous uses of anonymity that Anonymous put in service of truth-telling *and* social leveling. With the distance afforded by time, my conviction that Anonymous has been generally a trustworthy force in the world and commendable ambassador for the ethical and political uses of anonymity is even stronger today. Even if their presence and impact has significantly waned, they've left behind a series of lessons about the importance of anonymity that are as vital to heed as ever.

Of these lessons, I'll showcase three. First, I will consider the limits of transparency for combating lies and misinformation. Then, I'll turn to anonymity's capacity to protect truth-tellers. Lastly, I will unpack its ability to mitigate the harms of unbridled fame-seeking and celebrity in collective movements.

Lesson One: Transparency Is Not a Panacea for Misinformation

Since anonymity (and associated states, like secrecy) are often cast as problems vis-a-vis their political other, transparency, it's worth from the outset considering the importance but also limits of naively believing that sunshine is the best disinfectant. And there is no better time to do so

given the contemporary turbulence and crisis over trust, truth, junk news, and misinformation. Let me state from the outset that demanding transparency, in my political playbook, sits high on the list of expedient tactics that can help encourage democratic pursuits. Seeking transparency from powerful people, corporations, and institutions who may have something bad to hide, and the clout to hide it, has worked in countless circumstances to get the truth out or shame scumbags and con men out of their coveted positions of power (and I resolutely defend anonymity for its ability to engender transparency). Still, the effectiveness of demanding transparency and revealing truth has often been overstated, and its advocates have often attributed a naive, almost magical faith to such tactics, which they juxtapose to the ills of secrecy and anonymity.

This position—whereby transparency is elevated, often by denigrating anonymity and cognate conditions, like secrecy and obscurity—has been explored most thoroughly and thoughtfully by scholars like Claire Birchall. "This growing preference for transparency as a more enlightening, honorable mode of disclosure is not just a result of the positive qualities that are seen to be intrinsic to transparency (particularly e-transparency) itself," Birchall explains, "*but a response to the perceived negative characteristics of other forms of disclosure*."[14] In the past, when I've discussed the importance of anonymity and the limits of transparency for truth-telling (usually by drawing on her arguments), very few people would take me all that seriously for this very reason. Truth and openness were often seen as social goods, whereas secrecy and anonymity were deemed as that which clouded over sunshine's rays and disinfecting properties.

Much of this changed when Donald Trump became President and when gobs of misinformation from far and reactionary right media sources took deeper hold than ever before.[15] Suddenly, it became a lot easier to illustrate the logic behind Mark Twain's famous quip: "Truth is mighty and will prevail. There is nothing wrong with this, except that it ain't so." Although I certainly hoped that Trump's reign of lying would end after a string of exposés, every attempt to shame him into truth by showcasing his incessant zeal for lying failed. Many journalists initially assumed that the clear demonstration of his dishonesty would lead the electorate to a definite conclusion: that he is a pathological nut job. But, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz has argued, what constitutes a popular notion of "commonsense" is rarely, in contradistinction to the term itself, as commonsensical as it should seem.[16]

What many journalists failed to see is how Trump could overrule the facts with his robust power of performance. For a sufficient portion of the population, Trump was able to construct himself as a more authentic candidate by credibly selling a desirable fantasy of a different political way. As Trump railed and ranted against the establishment—often by defying decorum—his panache and charisma demonstrated a type of authenticity that enough citizens could believe in. Sure, he blazed a pathological trail of lies along the way, but he showed such disregard for the significance of his duplicity that the very tenure of the lie seemed to point to a higher, often moral truth.[17] During his speeches and the debates, he expressed his anti-status quo message as much through performance and behavior as through any utterance: he was outrageously cocky and defied all rules and norms of civility. While such behavior horrified some, transfixed like gawkers passing a massive pileup on the highway, others were thrilled by his willingness to be so unapologetically crude and rude.

Even if human dramaturgy and performance can be considered to be something of human universals, the success of performances is indebted to particular cultural ideals and historical contexts. In performance space, one can be authentically inauthentic: one can be lauded for bringing a realness to an unreality, by committing to it without reservation, and maintaining the suspension of disbelief. By branding himself as the more authentic candidate, a vision that at least enough voters found alluring, the payout was significant for Trump. After all, the ideal of authenticity is one of the core sentiments and moral ideals of the Western self, as Charles Taylor and others have argued.[18]

In contrast to Trump, at least when measured by some accepted standards of evidence, Anonymous—a sprawling, semi-chaotic (though also fairly organized at times) string of collectives, composed of thousands of people and dozens of distinct groups acting in all four corners of the globe under its name, with loose to no coordination between many of them—comes across, in almost every regard, as a more earnest and trustworthy entity.

While Trump helps us see this truth anew, I've long made the following point: If one takes stock of the vast majority of their operations after 2010, Anonymous generally followed several rather conventional scripts based on a drive to tell the truth. Anonymous would often pair an announcement about some indignation they sought to publicize with verifiable documents or other material. Such was the situation when Anonymous launched #OpTunisia in January 2011 and were some of the first outsiders

to access and broadly showcase the protest videos being generated on the ground—footage they posted online to arouse public sympathy and spur media coverage. Anonymous routinely acquired emails and documents (and have, by the way, never been found to have doctored them). They published them online, allowing journalists to subsequently mine them for their investigations. Their drive to get the truth out there was also aided by splashy material engineered to go viral.

On occasion, Anonymous relied on the classic prank—lobbing out a lie that was so absurd it was revealed as a fib to get to a higher truth. Or as media theorist Kembrew McLeod has elegantly defined it, "… pranks are playful critiques performed within the public sphere and amplified by the media."[19] For instance, the Anonymous-affiliated hacker crew Lulzsec hacked and defaced PBS in retaliation for its Frontline film on WikiLeaks, *WikiSecrets,* which drew the ire of LulzSec members who condemned the film for how sensationalized and psychoanalyzed the "dark" inner life of whistleblower Chelsea Manning, skirting the pressing political issues raised by the diplomatic cables she had handed over to Wikleaks for publication. With access to the webserver, the hackers implanted fake news about the whereabouts of two celebrity rappers. Featuring a boyish headshot of Tupac Shakur, with head slightly cocked, sporting a backwards cap and welcoming smile, the title announced the scoop: "Tupac still alive in New Zealand". It continued, "Prominent rapper Tupac has been found alive and well in a small resort in New Zealand, locals report. The small town—unnamed due to security risks—allegedly housed Tupac and Biggie Smalls (another rapper) for several years. One local, David File, recently passed away, leaving evidence and reports of Tupac's visit in a diary, which he requested be shipped to his family in the United States." At first glance, it may be unclear why the defacement delivered a particularly strong political statement. While the fake article and hack caused quite a sensation in the global press, most journalists failed to address Lulzsec's criticism of the film's shallow puffery. And yet, Lulzsec managed to force sensationalist coverage via its hack-hoax combo, instantiating their original critique of journalists' tendencies to sensationalize news stories through this backdoor.

But in most cases, Anonymous relied on hoaxing and pranking sparingly. Instead, they amplified campaigns or messages being already broadcast by other activists or journalists. For instance, one of their most famous operations, #OpStubenville, concerned a horrific case of sexual assault by members of the high school football team in a small steel factory

town of Steubenville, Ohio. After the *New York Times* wrote an exposé detailing the case, Anonymous continued to hyperactively showcase developments around the Steubenville assault through videos and on Twitter, ensuring its visibility for months, until two teenagers were found guilty of rape in May 2013.

The purpose of juxtaposing Trump's lying with Anonymous's truth-telling is merely to highlight that transparency and anonymity rarely follow a binary moral formula, with the former being virtuous and the latter being craven. There are many con men, especially in the political arena, who speak and lie without a literal mask—Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, G.W. Bush, Tony Blair, Jair Bolsonaro—and are never properly held accountable, or it requires a David and Goliath-like effort to eliminate them from power. Indeed, Trump, acting out in the open, is perceived to be "transparent" because he is an individual who doesn't hide behind a mask and for some, an honest politician for having the bravado to say anything, no matter how offensive (and for some, the more offensive, the better). As sociologist Erving Goffman suggested long ago, humans—so adept at the art of deception—deploy cunning language and, at times, conniving performance, as opposed to hiding, for effective misleading.[20]

It's also worth highlighting that Anonymous, like Trump, lured in both the public and the media with splashy acts of spectacle—and this is important to highlight when considering the limits of truth-telling using transparency alone. Just because Trump (and many others) can get away with lies, in part through compelling performances of authenticity, does not mean we should give up on the enterprise of truth-telling. What it shows is the project of truth-telling can't rely on evidence alone; it can always benefit from a shrewder public relations strategy, a lesson that Trump's antics also evince.

Lesson Two: The Shield and Mystery of Anonymity

Transparency can be achieved through existing institutional frameworks, whether by accessing public records, such as using the Freedom of Information Act, or through the watchdog function of the fourth estate. But when these methods fail, anonymous whistleblowing can be a useful aid and complement for getting the truth out. Support for this position is cogently articulated in the 1995 Supreme Court case *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, which argues anonymity safeguards the voter, the

truth-teller, and even the unpopular opinionator from government retribution or the angry masses of the body politic. The judges of the case wrote, “Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority... It thus exemplifies the purpose behind the Bill of Rights and of the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation... at the hand of an intolerant society.”[21] To signal their awareness of and contribution to this tradition, Anonymous participants are fond of quoting the Oscar Wilde quip, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

One of the most striking and effective examples that bears out the Supreme Court’s rationale and Oscar Wilde’s aphorism involves a face mask donned by a medical doctor. In 1972, a psychiatrist presenting at the American Psychiatric Association meetings concealed himself with a voice distorter, pseudonymous name, and a rubber mask. Going by Dr. H, and part of the panel, “Psychiatry: Friend or Foe to Homosexuals?” the doctor opened by confessing: “I am a homosexual. I am a psychiatrist.”[22] At the time, psychiatry classified “homosexuality” as an illness, making their classification particularly impervious to critique. This bold and gutsy revelation accomplished what Dr. H and his allies had set out to do: re-embolden ongoing efforts to depathologize homosexuality. Only a year later, the APA removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual. Dr. H, who had feared he would not receive academic tenure had his employer found out he was gay, remained protected (and employed), and only made his name public 22 years later as John E. Fryer.

Many other individuals and groups have spoken and acted truthfully undercover in an attempt to expose some abuse or crime and used anonymity to shield themselves not only from peers, colleagues, or employers, as Dr. Fryer’s did but from government retribution. Anonymous, Antifa (who fight fascists), Chelsea Manning (during her short tenure as an anonymous leaker), Deep Throat (the anonymous source in Watergate), and the Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI—all of which have commanded some measure of respect from their words and actions alone, and not their legal identities—have delivered transparency that was deemed valuable regardless of their perceived unaccountability or opacity. In exposing egregious government wrongdoing, anonymity has the potential to make the risky act of whistleblowing a bit safer. Such was the case with the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI, a group of seven anti-war crusaders who broke into an FBI field office in 1971 and left with crates of files, which contained proof of COINTELPRO,

a covert surveillance and disinformation program levied against dozens of activist movements. The US government eventually shut the program down after it was deemed illegal, and the intruders were never apprehended. Had these citizens been caught—the FBI dedicated 200 agents to the case but failing to find even one of the intruders, gave up in 1976—their fate would have most likely included a costly legal battle followed by time behind bars.[23]

Tragically, people who have spoken without a veil have often been exposed to grave harm and mudslinging. Being honest and transparent, especially when you lack supporters and believers, puts you at risk of a traumatic loss of privacy and, as in the case of Chelsea Manning, physical safety. After being outed by a hacker, the US government tortured Manning for one year in solitary confinement for her whistleblowing. Former American gymnast Rachael Denhollander, one of the first who dared to call out Larry Nassar, the medical doctor for the Olympic gymnastics team who sexually assaulted 250 young women, explained in an op-ed that her life and reputation were ruined for speaking out until the tide began to shift: “I lost my church. I lost my closest friends as a result of advocating for survivors who had been victimized by similar institutional failures in my own community. I lost every shred of privacy.”[24] All these examples call to mind the adage “privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful.” Anonymity can fulfill a prescription for transparency by protecting truth-tellers from retaliation. Cloaking also provides a potent dose of mystery that aids in giving a signal boost to the content, as the public wonders and imagines who the whistleblower may be.

Lesson Three: Ego-Containment and the Harms of Unbridled Celebrity

The rejection by Anonymous of cults of personality and celebrity-seeking is the least understood driver for anonymity and yet one of the most vital to understand. The workings of anonymity under this register function less as a truth-telling device and more as a method for social leveling. Anonymous came together not as a point of individual will, seeking credit, but as the convergence of a multitude of actors contributing to a multitude of existent social movements, collectives, and organizations and individual contributions.

Unless you followed Anonymous closely, this ethos was harder to glean. It was largely only visible in the backchannels of their social interactions—in private or semi-private chat rooms with occasional bursts on Twitter, such as this tweet by @FemAnonFatal:

> •FemAnonFatal is a Collective• NOT an individual movement NOT a place for self-promotion NOT a place for HATE BUT a place for SISTERHOOD It Is A Place to Nurture Revolution Read Our Manifesto @ https://www.anonymousvideo.eu/femanonfatal.html … •You Should Have Expected Us• #FemAnonFatal #OpFemaleSec.[25]

Of course, it's much easier to utter such lofty pronouncements about solidarity than it is actually to implement them. But Anonymous enforced this standard by punishing those who stepped out into the limelight, seeking fame and credit. In my many years of observing them, I've witnessed the direct consequences for those who violated this norm. If a novice participant was seen as pining for too much praise from peers, he might be softly warned and chided. For those that dared to append their legal name to some action or creation, the payback was fiercer. At a minimum, the transgressor was usually ridiculed or lambasted, with a few individuals ritually "killed off" by being banned from a chat room or network.

Along with punctuated moments of disciplinary action, this norm tended to hum along quietly in the background mostly, but no less powerfully—mandating that everything created under the aegis of Anonymous be attributed to the collective. It's worth stating that, in contrast to their better known outlaw-hacker compatriots, most Anonymous participants were maneuvering in unambiguously legal territory; those who conjured up compelling messages of hope, dissent, or protest through videos, snappy manifestos, images, or other clever calls to arms engineered to go viral had nothing to fear. They were not incentivized to anonymity by legal punishment. More so, the ethical decree to sublimate personal identity had teeth: participants generally refrained from signing their legal name to these works, some of which surged into prominence, receiving hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube. While a newcomer may have submitted to this decree out of fear of punishment, most participants came to embrace this ethos as a strategy necessary to their broader goals of minimizing human hierarchy and maximizing social equality.

Observing this leashing of the ego was eye-opening. The sheer difficulty of living out this credo revealed itself in practice. As an anthropologist, my methodological duty mandates some degree of direct participation. Most of my labor with Anonymous consisted of journalistic translation work. Still, on a few occasions, I joined small groups of media-makers to craft punchy messages for videos designed to rouse people to action. As an academic writer estranged from the need for pithiness, I recall glowing with pride at the compact wording I once cobbled together to channel the collective rage about some gross political injustice or another. Resisting even a smidgen of credit for the feat was difficult at the time, but in the long run satisfying, providing grounds from which to do it again. Still, it not only went against what I've been taught by society, but also the mode of being an academic—someone whose livelihood depends entirely on a well-entrenched, centuries-old system that allots respect based on individual recognition. As the self-named author of this piece, I'd be a hypocrite to advocate a full moratorium on personal attribution. But when a moral economy based on the drive for individual recognition expands to such an extent that it crowds out other possibilities, we can neglect, to our collective peril, other essential ways of being and being with others.

One of the many dangers of unchecked individualism or celebrity is the ease with which it transforms into full-blown narcissism, a personality trait that most obviously forecloses mutual aid, as it practically guarantees some level of interpersonal chaos, if not outright carnage in the form of vitriol, bullying, intimidation, and pathological lying. Trump, again, can serve as a handy reference, as he comes to stand for an almost platonic ideal of narcissism-in-action. His presidency has demonstrated that unapologetic solipsism can act as a sort of distortion lens: preventing the normal workings of transparency, truth, shaming, and accountability by offering an aloofness so complete that it seems almost incapable of contemplating the plight of others or admitting a wrong. And in Trump's ascendancy lies a far more disturbing and general lesson to contemplate: that the ability to land one of the most powerful political positions in one of the most powerful nations in the world is only possible because such celebrity-seeking behaviors are rewarded in many aspects of our society. Many dominant cultural ideals enjoin us to seek acknowledgment—whether for our deeds, words, or images. Although celebrity as a model is by no means new, there are endless and proliferating avenues at our disposal on the internet to realize, numerically register (in likes and retweets), and

thus consolidate and further normalize fame as a condition of everyday living.[26]

To be sure, narcissism or celebrity is far from unchecked. For instance, Trump's arrogant, self-aggrandizing traits are subject today to savage critique and analysis by a cadre of pundits, journalists, and other commentators. Even if celebrity is a durable, persistent, and ever-expanding cultural ideal, society also valorizes humility. This tendency is true in religious life most obviously, but a bevy of mundane, everyday ethical proscriptions also seek to curb the human ego's appetite for glory and gratification. Something as minor as the acknowledgment section of a book works—even if ever so slightly—to reign in the egoistic notion that individuals are entirely responsible for the laudable creations, discoveries, or works of art attributed to them. After all, it's an extended confession and moment of gratitude to acknowledge that such writing would be impossible or much worse if not for the aid of a community of peers, friends, and family. Turning to online sociality, part of the exuberant enthusiasm around online, open content projects such as Wikipedia and open-source projects was due to their collaborative nature, whereby production and development unfolded via a multitude of contributions.

Still, tales that celebrate participation alongside solidarity, equality, mutual aid, and humility are rare. And scarcer still are existing projects and social mandates where individuals are called upon to hone the art of self-effacement. To be sure, dozens of smaller collectives like the Gorilla Girls, Pussy Riot, and The Invisible Committee ask their members to sublimate individual identity in favor of collective attribution. Still, these examples are socially bounded and contained. Anonymous, in contrast, acted as one of the largest laboratories, open to many, to carry out a collective experiment in curtailing the desire for individual credit, encouraging ways to connect with our peers through commitments to indivisibility.

While anonymity can incentivize all sorts of actions and behaviors, in Anonymous's case the overt ethical commitment to this ideal meant many of the participants were there for reasons of principle. Their principled quest to right the wrongs inflicted on people embodies the spirit of altruism. Their demand for humility helped to discourage, even if it did not fully eliminate, those participants that simply sought personal glory from joining their ranks. Volunteers, compelled into crediting Anonymous, also kept in check a problem plaguing all kinds of projects or social movements: the self-nomination of a rockstar or leader, propelled into stardom by the media, whose reputational successes and failures can often

unfairly serve as proxy for the rise and fall of the movement writ large. If such self-promotion becomes flagrant, strife and infighting typically afflict social dynamics, which in turn weakens the group's power to organize effectively. The already limited energy is diverted away from campaigns and instead wasted on managing the power-hungry individuals.

Conclusion

It's dangerous to romanticize anonymity as virtuous in and of itself. Anonymity online combined with bad-faith actors—pathological abusers, criminals, and collective hordes of trolls—enables behavior with awful, sometimes genuinely terrifying consequences. Anonymity can aid and abet cruelty even as it can engender nobler moral and political ends—it depends on the context.

Taking stock of Anonymous' fuller history illustrates this duality. Before 2008, the name Anonymous had been used almost exclusively for internet trolling—a practice that often amounts to targeting people and organizations for harassment, desecrating reputations, and revealing humiliating or personal information.[27] Having myself once been a target in 2010 of a (thankfully unsuccessful) trolling attack, I was thrilled—even if quite surprised—at the dramatic conversion process Anonymous underwent between 2008 and 2010 as they began to troll the powerful, eventually combining the practice with more traditional vocabularies and repertories for protest and dissent.

As they parted ways with pure trolls, what remained the same was a commitment to anonymity, used for different ends under different circumstances. Still, several Anonymous operations serving the public interest,[28] such as the wholesale dumping of emails that breached people's privacy, were carried out imperfectly, and are worthy of condemnation. These imperfect operations should not nullify the positive aspects that they achieved through anonymity, but should nevertheless be criticized for their privacy violations and used as examples for improving their methods.

Preventing the state from stamping out anonymity requires strong rationales for its essential role in safeguarding democracy. In defending anonymity, it is difficult to simply argue, much less prove, that the good it enables always outweighs its harms, as the social outcomes of anonymity are hard to tally. Notwithstanding the difficulties in measurement, history has shown that nation-states with unchecked surveillance power drift

toward despotism and totalitarianism. Citizens under watch, or simply under the threat of surveillance, live in fear of retribution and are discouraged from individually speaking out, organizing, and breaking the law in ways that keep states and corporations accountable. Another way of stating this is that the end of privacy and anonymity would come with vast and detrimental determinantal social costs.

More so—and this always bears repeating—in ensuring citizens have a right to anonymity, states do not lose the ability or capacity to deal with criminals, even those that use anonymity. Indeed, governments are often endowed with a mandate and are significantly resourced to hunt down criminals, including those emboldened by invisibility. For instance, to take the case of the United States, the FBI requested around 21.6 million of its 8 billion annual 2018 budget to its "Going Dark" program, used to "develop and acquire tools for electronic device analysis, cryptanalytic capability, and forensic tools."[29] They can develop or pay for pricey software exploits or hacking tools, which they've used to infiltrate and take over child porn sites, as they did in 2015 with a site called PlayPen.[30] Certainly, the state should have the ability to find criminals. But if it is provided with unrestricted surveillance capabilities as part of that mission, citizens will lose the capacity to be anonymous, and the government then creeps into fascism, which is its own type of criminality. Activists, who are often resource poor, are often targeted unfairly by state actors due to the use and abuse of surveillance, and therefore require anonymity. Indeed, anonymity allows activists, sources, and journalists, not yet targeted by the state, to speak, associate, and organize, as is their fundamental democratic right, without interference.

Unequivocally defending anonymity in such a way doesn't make all uses of anonymity by citizens acceptable. When assessing the social life of anonymity, one must also ask a series of questions: What is the anonymous action? Who, what cause, or which social movements are being aided? Is it punching up or down? All of these factors clarify the stakes and the consequences of using the shield of anonymity. It invites solutions for mitigating some of its harms instead of demanding anonymity's elimination entirely. Technologists can redesign digital platforms to prevent abuse, for example, by enabling the reporting of offending accounts. Recognizing anonymity's misuse is why we also ensure limited law enforcement capacity to de-anonymize those who are using the cover for activities society has deemed unconscionable, like child pornography. As it stands now the state commands vast resources in the form of money,

technology, and legitimacy for effective law enforcement. To additionally call for ending secure encryption, backdoors, or bans on anonymity tools—something the FBI often does—is to call for the unacceptable elimination of the many legitimate uses of anonymity.

In spite of these justifications, it is difficult to defend anonymity when some people only have an inchoate sense of anonymity's connection to democratic processes, or see no need for anonymity at all, and others only see it as a magnet for depraved forms of criminality, cowardice, and cruelty. I was reminded of this very point recently, after running into one of my former students while traveling. Surprised to recognize me in the group she was about to go scuba diving with, she gleefully identified me by the subject of study: "You're the hacker professor!" A few hours later, as we climbed out of a small skiff, she asked me unprompted to remind her of my arguments against the common dismissal of privacy and anonymity on the grounds of the speaker "having nothing to hide." I chuckled, given that my mind was occupied with these very questions as I puzzled through this article, and rattled off a number of the arguments explored here. I'm unsure whether these arguments escaped her because years had elapsed, my lecture was boring, or because the merits of anonymity are counterintuitive to many; likely it was some combination of all three. Regardless, I was pleased that she even had the question on her mind.

It was a reminder that at a time when anonymous actors working for good aren't readily available in the news, as they were during the days of Anonymous, those of us attempting to salvage anonymity's reputation need to put forward compelling tales of moral good enabled by anonymity, rather than explore it only as some abstract concept, righteous on its own, independent of context. Anonymous remains an exemplar case study to that aim. Aside from using the shield for direct action and dissent, for seeking truth and transparency, Anonymous also has provided a zone where the recalibration of credit and attribution has not just been discussed but truly enacted. Anonymous, which offered temporary asylum from the imperative to incessantly vie for personal attention, encouraged collective notoriety by tempering personal celebrity, calling upon its participants to fight injustice by standing anonymously as one. The act of masking one's identity, so often seen as the progenitor of vice, fraud, and cowardice, can also serve to shepherd truth-telling, humility, and solidarity. By looking back on Anonymous's reign, these virtues can

be brought into relief for future generations of actors seeking to wield anonymity as a weapon of the weak.

Notes

1. For accounts covering Anonymous' pivot away from trolling to activism, see Beyer (2014) and Coleman (2015).
2. See Gray (2011).
3. See Tynes (2017).
4. See website. Available at: https://twitter.com/es_snipes/status/949439844140437504 (January 5, 2018).
5. See Zuboff (2019).
6. See Esguerra (2009).
7. See Coleman (2019).
8. See Asenbaum (2018).
9. For a groundbreaking exposition on the role of anonymity in fomenting these practices, see Citron (2016). In contrast to some critics of harassment, Citron makes the case that anonymity should not be eliminated even as we aggressively seek solutions to stamp out online harassment. Anonymity, she shows, is vital to protect the vulnerable and those who are often targeted.
10. See Scott (2012). To be clear, Scott's work has traditionally used "weapon of the weak" to refer to those populations unable to use the cover of anonymity to speak loudly and clearly. Still, I am using the phrase, which predates his work, to refer to those people in vulnerable positions who can amass a bit more power and protection by using anonymity.
11. See website. Available at: https://discordleaks.unicornriot.ninja/discord/ (n.d.) and Joseph (2017).
12. See Deseriis (2015).
13. For a notable exception, see Scheuerman (2016). Scheuerman tackles and defends what he calls digital disobedience, including several actions by Anonymous hackers who deployed anonymity to pull off and protect their identities.
14. Emphasis my own, Birchall (2014).
15. For a detailed account on the far right, recruitment, and misinformation, see Marwick and Lewis (2017) and see Benkler et al. (2018) for a discussion of how the right news media ecology, from talk radio to Fox News and new internet news intermediaries, help to ensure the circulation of misinformation.
16. See Geertz (1975).
17. See Barthes (2013) on American pro wrestling for an incisive discussion of how such an overtly "fake" sport—that everyone, including audience

members, accepts as fake—still conveys moral truths around justice, good, and evil through "theatrical excess."

18. See Guignon (2004).
19. See McLeod (2014, 5).
20. See Goffman (1959).
21. See *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*.
22. See Vaughanbell (2006).
23. See Medsger (2014).
24. See Denhollander (2018).
25. See website. Available at: https://twitter.com/FEMANON_/status/961603085876461568 (February 8, 2018).
26. Online celebrity seeking or celebrity culture/s are certainly not monolithic, nor do they always feed into pathological narcissism, as an extensive literature on this topic demonstrates; see Marwick (2007, 2013), Senft and Baym (2015). More so, celebrity seeking has a much longer history than recent media and mediums; see Inglis (2010). Still online platforms and thus, sociality do indeed provide many opportunities for sculpting and exalting these behaviors, especially in contrast to those that encourage silent, corporatist forms of solidarity.
27. See Phillips (2016).
28. See Coleman (2017).
29. See Cushing (2017).
30. See Kravets (2017).

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The Condividual Interface: From the Filter Bubble to the Shared Reputation

Marco Deseriis

In his notable book *The Interface Effect*, Alexander Galloway identifies two models of the interface. The first model is based on the metaphor of the frame, the doorway, the glass window, and the screen. In this model, the interface is an unobtrusive and transparent threshold whose function is to support representations, facilitate perception, and enable transitions between spaces without being noticed, without placing a burden on those who watch, pass through, and so on. Galloway aptly notes that this model of the interface dovetails with a consolidated strand in media theory—which goes from Marshall McLuhan to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin—according to which the content of a medium is always a previous medium. This "onion skin model" imagines the media as containers of previous media: "What is video but a container for film. What is the Web but a container for text, image, video clips, and so on. Like the layers of an onion, one format encircles another, and it is media all the way down."[1]

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But this is not the whole story. Galloway adds that there exists a second strand in media theory, which understands the interface as what Francois Dagognet describes as an "area of choice" and a "fertile nexus."[2] In this strand, the interface is quite visible and demanding, it has its own autonomy. According to Galloway, the main function of this type of interface is to establish a connection between the center and the edge of art, between the human and the divine, between representation and its condition of possibility. This is the moment in which Homer invokes the Muse to inspire his own poem, or the modern avant-garde's technique of defamiliarization and laying bare the device. From the dada manifestoes to William Burroughs and Bryon Gysin's cut-up technique to Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and Joan Leandre's unplayable games, this type of interface is not a tool just awaiting to be used. Rather, in this experimental tradition, the interface becomes something that poses a problem to the subject who seeks the pleasure of reading, watching, and playing—to the user who wants information at her fingertips.

And yet, for all their differences, these two models of the interface have something in common insofar as they establish a certain aesthetic relationship between the subject and the world. In the case of the threshold model, the interface is meant to increase efficiency and human mastery via mimetic representation, perspectival illusionism, cinematic *mise-en-scène*, 3D modeling, and so on. In the fertile nexus model, it is the materiality of the medium that is foregrounded—a medium that becomes part of the world rather than functioning as an invisible gateway to it. From a Marxist angle, the task of the cultural critic would be to leave behind the transparent surface of the interface to unveil the (free) labor that lurks behind it. Galloway himself seems to hint at this when he introduces the term *intraface* to describe "an interface internal to the interface," which marks an "imaginary dialogue between the unworkable to the workable,"[3] between that which is subject to experimentation and that which is ready to hand.

But this concept is not a move toward political economy, if not an oblique one. The intraface is in fact a "zone of indecision" that lies entirely "within the aesthetic."[4] In other words, it is a conceptual apparatus for bringing together the two theories of the interface—or for capturing a tension within the interface between the center and the edge of the work, where the latter is "an arrow pointing to the outside, that is, pointing to the actually existing social and historical reality in which the work sits."[5] To illustrate the concept, Galloway dwells on the online

role-playing game *World of Warcraft*, which requires users to acquaint themselves with a complex graphical interface, a "two-dimensional overlay" embedding multiple icons, texts, numbers, and progress bars. The dominance of this nondiegetic space over the diegetic gamespace suggests that in WoW "the 'outside,' or the social, has been woven more intimately into the very fabric of the aesthetic than in previous times" so that the WoW interface ends up resembling "a factory floor, an information-age sweatshop, custom tailored in every detail for cooperative ludic labor."[6]

And yet one could argue that the opposite is even truer. Although WoW is a popular online game, mastering its interface requires time and effort, which means that the game is a training ground for a particular type of demographics. But the rise of social media as the most popular media of our time, tells a different story about the relationship between the diegetic and the nondiegetic within the aesthetic. If the minimalist, transparent, and user-friendly interfaces of social media are capable of enveloping the social as a whole, it is because they foreground easily consumable content while leaving the nondiegetic in the background. Indeed, the discrete metrical apparatus that surrounds social media content elicits countable user responses (likes, shares, comments), without encroaching on the diegetic. This is technically possible because the social web protocols separate data and software architecture (Liu 2004), which allows in turn for the decentralization of data production and the centralization of data collection.[7] From this angle, the intraface of social media weaves the social dimension of user-generated data (the edge of the work) into the algorithmic dimension of data collection and data mining (the center of the work) invisibly and without tension, that is, ideologically.

In this sense, reversing Galloway's reading of the WoW intraface, what we might call the social media intraface (SMI) works like an arrow pointing from the edge of the platform to the center of the platform. This type of intraface is not a zone of indecision that lies entirely within the image. Rather it is an apparatus that lies *below* or *behind* the image, where it performs a twofold function. First, the SMI marks the passage from representation to metrics, from the socio-symbolic dimension of networked communication to the analytic dimension of metadata. Second, the SMI employs machine learning algorithms on large data sets to rank information and recommend lists of items—such as users, groups, events, and products—and thus to reprogram social interaction. From this angle, the SMI is a mode of mediation that allows for the passage from

the social to the metrical and from the metrical back to the social. At the same time, because the SMI uses the transparent logic of the onion skin model (the user-friendly interface) to disguise the operations of the fertile nexus model (the data mining and ranking algorithms), it is ideological in character.

We will have therefore to first uncover this ideological dimension of the SMI to then examine its procedural dimension. My argument will be that while the critique of ideology is still essential to understand how networked subjectivity is constructed via the opaque operations of the intraface, such critique is insufficient to envision alternative processes of subjectivation. Because the SMI produces a particular type of subject—a narcissistic subject trapped in imaginary filter bubbles—the question to be asked is whether there exists a type of interface which may allow for a different set of encounters. Thus, after considering different strategies for exposing and escaping the narcissistic subjectivity that is produced by the SMI, we will examine a set of artistic and political practices that have experimented with shared processes of subjectivation well before the rise of the internet. Because of their openness, these practices have developed ethical and political norms that serve to contain the radical ambiguity of shared subjectivity. The challenge will be to show how these norms do not operate behind or below the interface but are themselves a type of interface, or an *inter-face*, which is immanent to the concatenation of singularities.

The Social Media Intraface as Imaginary Filter

Whereas it is seemingly transparent, efficient, and user-friendly, the social media interface presents users with information that is selected on the basis of the personal data they relinquish when they set up an account as well as their daily use of the platform. As is known, the relationship between the input information generated by the user and the output information that the platform selects for user consumption is regulated by proprietary algorithms. Following a classic input-throughput-output model, these algorithms process user requests by selecting elements from an internal data set and assign relevance to them based on the user's available characteristics.[8] But while the input and the output are visible to the user, the throughput or processing phase is removed from the interface and thus operates below the perception of the user. From this angle, the

social media interface offers a seemingly transparent access to data whose selection and relevance is in fact determined by highly opaque algorithms.

In a way, this is nothing new. As Wendy Chun has argued, all GUI-based software is "a functional analog to ideology" in that (a) the user is interpellated and produced qua user by the software itself; and (b) the user must suspend the disbelief and take the features and conventions of the graphical user interface at their face value, that is, without knowledge of the underlying computational processes: "Users know very well that their folders and desktops are not really folders and desktops, but they treat them as if they were—by referring to them as folders and as desktops," writes Chun.[9] The social media interface takes the fetishistic logic of the GUI a step further. First, this type of GUI represents the user as part of a network of users rather than as an individual software user. Paraphrasing Zizek, we could say that users know very well that their social media friends and followers are not really friends and followers, but they treat them as if they were. This is not only a semantic question. Rather—and this is the second feature of the SMI ideology—platform users are required to play a specific language game in order to be recognized as part of a social media "community." Symbolically, the game is constructed through an iconic and indexical system of stimuli and rewards—the so-called social buttons—whose primary function is to extract valuable data points from social interaction.[10]

It has been noted that this system of stimuli and rewards is highly addictive because it is based on the operant conditioning of a Skinner box, which issues rewards following an unpredictable rate of response. Based on the design principles of gambling machines, the algorithms behind social media buttons randomly distribute reputational rewards with the goal of increasing engagement.[11] This means that users find gratification in a myriad "filter bubbles," which constantly reinforce their own biases.[12] In this way, the social media interface functions as an imaginary filter of sorts. Here the term imaginary is to be understood in the Lacanian sense, that is to say, as a primarily narcissistic relationship of the self to itself, which is mediated in this case by an interface that sets the stage for the fantasies of desire. Indeed, at a first sight, the social media interface provides the user with a complete image of his interests, his actual and aspirational social networks, and so on. At the same time, however, the interface displays the conscious and unconscious wants and machinations, the projected desires and fantasies of networked others—what Lacan calls the Symbolic order. As is known, in Lacan the Imaginary and

the Symbolic are deeply intertwined. Whereas the subject initially gets a definition of itself from an image in the mirror, because such image is part of the external world, the subject is symbolically defined by something other than itself.[13] Within the social media interface, however, the mediation of Imaginary-Symbolic realities is heavily skewed toward the Imaginary insofar as the user can manually block individual users, refuse their friendship requests, and filter out unwanted content—thereby returning to the ideal space of the pre-Oedipal subject. Further the platform selects content on the basis of an algorithmic scoring of users' daily interactions, reinforcing existing social affinities.

Given these features, I propose to call this type of interface the imaginary filter. As previously noted, the imaginary filter is made of two primary components: a front end from which we look at our social selves; and a backend from which we are looked at and monitored by algorithms (and, occasionally, humans). Thus, the imaginary filter functions like a *one-way mirror*—a mirror that is reflective on one side and transparent on the other side. The problem is that users are on the reflective side of the mirror, which means that even if they are vaguely aware of being watched, there is nothing they can do to change the algorithmic filters that run on the transparent side of the mirror.

For sure, the more these machines get to know users better than they know themselves, the more users witness a generalized loss of control. If the interface has become a one-way mirror, and the user is on the wrong side of the mirror, then she is faced with a dilemma. Because disposing of the imaginary filter would mean being exposed to information that does *not* reflect her interests, freedom from algorithmic control would also coincide with a loss of control over desirable information. At the same time, users' acceptance of a symbolic authority that is capable of structuring their realities *beyond* subjective differences would increase symbolic efficiency and reduce the fragmentation of meaning in the online world.[14] But while refusing the filter bubble is theoretically possible, in actuality online social relationships are so mediated by algorithms that algorithmic filters have become almost naturalized. From this perspective, critical users usually undertake one of two strategies: demystification and exposure of the algorithmic filter or obfuscation and exodus from social media platforms. In the remainder of this chapter, I will first discuss these two approaches to then turn to a third, less common, strategy: concatenation and condividuality.

Two Strategies of Demystification: Exposure and Obfuscation

The first approach, demystification as exposure, is well-established in the fine arts and insists entirely upon the realm of representation. Here the rationale is that you cannot criticize, oppose, or change that which you cannot see, that which escapes perception. Thus, it is a matter of making visible the invisible, of setting the aesthetic conditions for a different partition of the sensible.[15] For example, Michael Najaar's High Altitude (2008–2010) is a project that represents the graph of different stock market indexes as "realistic mountain ranges" to make us reflect on the unmeasurable and uncanny nature of the global financial system (as well as of its environmental impact). Or we could think of the widespread use of data visualization software to represent social influence on Twitter and other social media platforms as an attempt to shed light on the logic of the imaginary filter.

The strategy of demystification and exposure entails in my opinion two major risks. The first is the risk of aestheticizing data, that is, of making these platforms look even more uncanny than what they already are. We might call this risk the technological sublime. The second risk, which is more pertinent to data visualization software, is that network diagrams can only reveal to users what they already know, namely, that they are caged in their filter bubbles. From this angle, the technological sublime of artistic metaphors à la Michael Najaar and the technological realism of data visualization software are two sides of the same coin. In turning algorithmic power into an object of contemplation, these aesthetic strategies endow the imaginary filter with the material and objective existence that it precisely lacks in the users' daily experience but without revealing anything significant about its functioning. In other words, data visualization shows users that they are trapped in their filter bubbles, but that there is nothing they can do about it because the big Other encoded as algorithmic governance has determined that networked segregation is the condition of their online happiness.

If the strategy of demystification as exposure ends up reinforcing the imaginary filter, the second strategy of demystification as obfuscation and exodus takes the opposite route of circumventing the filter or ignoring it altogether. Such strategy does not take an anti-Internet stance, only an anti-social media one. Based on the use of tunneling protocols and encryption software, this set of individual and collective practices is based

on strong ethics of "crypto-freedom" from government control and, to a lesser extent, corporate surveillance.[16] The second strategy includes a whole range of disconnectionist practices that go from closing social media accounts to taking long respites from the Internet.[17] The problem with these two strategies is that they both come at a high cost. Indeed, the crypto-freedom approach requires individuals to spend time and resources in educating themselves on how to escape control. This libidinal investment is itself sufficient to create communities of hackers, geeks, and technophiles who share a technoculture, but who are also often unable to communicate with the vast majority of people who do *not* educate themselves. The disconnectionist approach is even more costly as fewer and fewer people can really afford the luxury of being offline. Even in this case, the costs of technical self-education and the costs of self-exclusion from the network are two sides of the same coin. In ignoring the way the vast majority of people inform themselves and communicate online, cypherpunks, crypto-hackers, and disconnectionists leave the imaginary filter essentially untouched.

To sum up, while data visualization objectifies users' fantasies about the power of algorithms granting them the ideological status they would otherwise lack, tactics of obfuscation and exodus set in motion alternative processes of subjectivation, which, however, leave the design and politics of interfaces untouched. As we noted, the politics of the SMI is essentially defined by metrification. Without basic units such as the social media profile and social buttons for the quantification of social capital and social sentiment, the SMI would not be capable of serving the analytic algorithms that run the backend of the imaginary filter. These algorithms break down each user's profile on the basis of discrete actions she performs vis-à-vis other users. These *dividual* electronic transactions, as Gilles Deleuze famously termed them, are the basic units of informational capitalism, which recombines the data we leave behind in a potentially infinite variety of data sets.[18]

The Condividual Interface as a Boundary Subject

Here it is worth pausing on this double operation. First, the social media interface generates data by *cutting* our actions from the analog continuum through a logical procedure that marks distinction. The social media button, the dynamic form window, the ongoing nudges to express our own thoughts and feelings are all devices designed to extract data

points from the continuum of social life. This segmentation—or dividualization—of the online self becomes the condition for a second operation: the recombination of multiple data points into variable data sets. This means that the dividual datum is always ready to be reassembled with other dividuals through different attributes and metadata descriptions. Thus, as compared to the individual—which prides itself on its unique properties—the dividual has the advantage of being combinable with other divisible beings that share some properties with it. As Gerald Raunig notes, "*dividuum* has one component or multiple components, which constitute it as divisible and concatenate it with other parts that are similar in their components: similarity, not sameness or identity, similarity concerning only some components."[19]

Given that the dividual is nothing but a part that can be detached from and reattached to other dividuals, how does the SMI contribute to articulate this logic? To answer this question, we have first to consider that while the algorithmic governance of social media relies on large data sets, which are in turn assemblages of dividual data, at the level of the interface the social media user is interpellated and subjectified as an individual. Indeed, the front end of the imaginary filter produces the subject as a *unified* signifying entity—with her social roles, her professional status, her particular network of friends and acquaintances, and so on. Thus, the front end of the imaginary filter projects a consistent image that is built around the individual and individuated social media profiles. The back end of the imaginary filter, however, extracts value at the level of the metadata. And metadata go beyond the individuated subject to insist on the molecular, pre-individual or infrasocial level, on the level of affects and relations that have not been (yet) individuated and assigned to a subject.[20] So, the social media intraface is ideological in that in the process of breaking down the social into the infra-social—that is, into data sets of virtual relations onto which calculations are constantly performed—it only represents those relations that fit the user interface at a given moment in time.

The challenge then is to free the virtuality of these data sets *within* the interface so as to reveal the nexus between that which appears to be social and that which produces the social. Differently put, it is a matter of letting the algorithmic operations performed on the dividual data sets emerge from the back end of the imaginary filter onto what we might call a *condividual interface*—an interface assembled out of dividual components. This type of interface would not represent social relations. Rather, it would be an opening onto the virtuality of the social, that is, onto the

predispositions and behaviors users unknowingly share as they belong in different social groups. As is known, different types of predispositions and personality traits have been mapped on large data sets via the psychometric profiling of social media users. In particular, researchers have shown how seemingly mundane user actions—such as liking a brand on Facebook—can be used to infer gender and racial differences as well as to predict the sexual, religious and political orientations of users.[21] Similarly, researchers have shown how algorithmic changes in the prioritization of emotionally charged posts in the Facebook News Feed positively affect how users perceive subsequent posts.[22]

The problem with this type of studies is that they have been conducted without user consent, and, most of all, those users are unaware of how psychological targeting can be used to influence consumer behavior as well as electoral choice.[23] At the same time, the public uproar ensuing the Facebook experiment and the Cambridge Analytica scandal have overshadowed the deeper implications of psychological research on social media. My wager is that the metadata on how users respond to popular digital items can be understood as "boundary objects," or as *means of translation* between different social worlds.[24] According to Star and Griesemer, boundary objects such as labels, maps, standardized forms, and repositories enable actors belonging to different social worlds to describe the same object from different perspectives. Similarly, within the social space of social media platforms, dynamic form windows for posting, social buttons recording user emotional responses, and databases for information storage and retrieval allow different individuals (and to a lesser extent, different social worlds) to translate each other's perspectives. Even more interestingly, popular digital objects such as viral videos, popular brands, pop culture icons, and so on, function themselves as boundary objects whose metadata reveal the intersecting personality traits and common orientations of millions of people.

What would it mean to democratize and politicize these types of objects? First, in order to democratize these data, we would need to return their capacity to describe relations that go beyond the individual to the user themselves. This would be designed as a two-step process. First governments would need to legislate to transform proprietary metadata into (anonymized) open data available for public consultation and research. Second, the actual management of such data would be left to the users themselves, who would manage them as *big data commons*. Such commoning of the metadata would entail their emergence from the

backend of the imaginary filter onto the plane of the condividual interface. To be sure, the socialization of large data sets would not define their aesthetic presentation. But this is not a primary issue insofar as APIs already allow users to design their own interfaces, which could be user-friendly or experimental, depending on need. What matters is that public and decentralized access to big data would allow users to ask a much more diversified set of questions than the ones that are currently asked by neuromarketers and political consultants. Rather than studying how certain personality traits are correlated to a particular brand or product, users could in fact discover how the circulation of digital objects is related to a wide range of social, cultural, economic, and environmental processes. Further, this socialization of metadata would entail a shift in their nature from boundary object (a simple means of description) to boundary subject (a machinic process of subjectivation). Indeed, once users gain collective access to metadata they can test how users respond to the circulation of certain objects and how these responses disclose in turn emerging processes of subjectivation. This double process of translation—from the data to the users and from the users back to the data—is the mode of mediation of the condividual interface.

Shared Pseudonyms as Condividual Interfaces

To be sure, there is no guarantee that the collectivization and subjectivation of metadata will lead to the common good. Freeing the metadata from the fetters of intellectual property and government control would in fact leave the open question of how these data are to be managed. Indeed, the possible creation of big data commons would not change the nature of social desire, which is not intrinsically oriented toward cooperation and collaboration. On the contrary, under late capitalism and communicative capitalism desire can be narcissistically closed in on itself.[25] Thus we must consider the broader societal conditions from which these data are extracted as integral to their management and co-production. For this reason, it is important to conceive the condividual interface not as something that may exist only in an Ideal state—e.g., *after* the revolution—but that is already present in embryo within collective practices that construct subjectivity as a common good.

One of such practices is the authorial strategy of sharing a pseudonym for aesthetic and political purposes. Although collective pseudonyms long preexist the internet, they can be understood as condividual processes of

subjectivation in that each dividual use of the pseudonym is a component of an assemblage of enunciation characterized by multiplicity. For this reason, I have defined a shared pseudonym as an improper name, that is, a name that fails to circumscribe a clearly defined referent—be it collective or individual.[26] Shared pseudonyms include Ned Ludd, the eponymous leader of the English Luddites in the 1810s; Allen Smithee, an artificial signature shared by Hollywood film directors from 1969 to 1999 to disown movies and work outside of their reputation; Monty Cantsin, Karen Eliot, and Luther Blissett, three aliases shared by artists and activists to perform media pranks and criticize bourgeois notions of authorship from the 1970s to the 1990s; and Anonymous, a moniker adopted by thousands of Internet users to attack governments and corporations that restrict access to information and information technologies since 2006. Whereas these pseudonyms belong in different historic epochs and contexts, they all share three formal features: (1) empowering a subaltern social group by providing a medium for identification and mutual recognition to its users (2) enabling those who do not have a voice of their own to acquire a symbolic power outside the boundaries of an institutional practice; and (3) expressing a process of subjectivation characterized by the proliferation of difference.[27]

Let us consider here the second feature, the symbolic power of an improper name. Pierre Bourdieu has defined symbolic power as an institutional power of acting upon the social world through performative utterances that have the force of action.[28] From this angle, pseudonyms such as Ludd, Smithee, Blissett, and Anonymous are all forms of symbolic power in their own right. But instead of being managed through an institution such as a government, a church or a corporation, the symbolic power of an improper name is directly managed by the users of the alias via an *authorizing context*. Authorizing contexts may include sanctioned organizations such as unions, but also art and activist collectives, social movements, and Internet-based communities. Whereas an authorizing context can try and limit access to the pseudonym to its creators and early adopters, as soon as these names are released in the public domain they lend themselves to unforeseen appropriations and third-party usages. It is through their encoding in a variety of media and their circulation in the public sphere that these aliases take on a life of their own and become improper.

So, while the authorizing context regulates access to the pseudonym, the circulation of the name in the public domain undermines the capacity

of the authorizing context to exert such control. When the pseudonym is controlled by a strong authorizing context—as in the case of the Directors Guild of America's invention of Alan Smithee—we will speak of a *collective pseudonym*. When the pseudonym is introduced in the public domain with few guidelines and instructions for use—as is the case of pseudonyms such as Monty Cantsin, Karen Eliot, Luther Blissett and Anonymous—we will speak of *multiple-use names*. Although weak authorizing contexts exert less control over the pseudonym, they can admit within themselves competing and even contradictory uses of the pseudonym—as the cases of Monty Cantsin, Luther Blissett, and Anonymous clearly demonstrate.[29] This is because as the authorizing context releases the right to control the symbolic power of the alias, it also develops tactical capacities to respond to unforeseen uses of the pseudonym. From this angle, improper names are condividual processes of subjectivation that concatenate the heterogeneity of the social without attempting to articulate it hegemonically.

The fact that improper names are expressions of tactical capacities and a highly contextual knowledge does not mean that such knowledge cannot be replicated. On the contrary, the relationships of affinity and war that emerge through the concatenation of dividual uses of the same pseudonym produce *information*—that is, knowledge, codes, and technologies for a politics of the incommensurable. In other words, the *cum-* that emerges from the con-dividual process is a type of information that expresses a capacity to transfer a singular process of concatenation from one context to another. As McKenzie Wark puts it: "To abstract is to construct a plane upon which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations."[30] In enabling the concatenation of heterogeneous elements, this plane exceeds the singular conjunction and becomes a carrier of informational patterns. The virtual nature of these patterns allows in turn for many possible actualizations. Thus, if we admit that abstraction is not merely reductive (as in the case of exchange value), but it is also generative, then the *cum-* of condividualiy becomes capable of setting in motion many types of relations. To be sure, this kind of *cum* is much more reliant on local context and circumstances than exchange value. But it is not ephemeral—and thus does not need to be invented always anew—because it carries a memory of its prior individuations.

For example, all social movements organize drawing inspiration from "repertoires of contention" such as assemblies, demonstrations, strikes,

occupations, and sit-ins, which they repurpose and adapt to their local circumstances.[31] These repertoires are nothing but a shared set of ethical, political, and aesthetic codes, some of which are handed down from tradition and some of which emerge from the novel encounter of singularities. Such codes differ from the algorithmic logic of the imaginary filter in that they are constantly renegotiated and adapted to local circumstances, which they can never entirely transcend or organize from without, from a backend. If these codes go often unnoticed it is because they cannot be properly seen, they cannot be properly represented. However, this does not mean that they do not exist, or that they should be intentionally obfuscated so as to prevent recuperation. On the contrary, the question is precisely how to grasp the process of mediation when it lacks the aesthetic qualities that would grant it the status of a proper interface. For example, the contradictory process of sharing a reputation offers an understanding of the "inter-face" as immanent to the encounter of dividuals rather than as a surface, a stage or a window that presents and organizes such encounter. Indeed, acting *via* an interface is not quite the same thing as acting *through* an inter-face. While the former implies that the interface is already given and separate from the event, the latter marks the inseparability of event and medium.[32]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the condividual interface is a mode of mediation that is clearly distinguishable from two established models of the interface: the interface as a transparent surface, which presents, enfolds and remediates previous media (the onion skin model); and the interface as a nexus between the center and the edge of art, between representation and its conditions of possibility (the fertile nexus model). Whereas the interface as a transparent surface functions as a disguise and calls for a critique of its ideological function, the fertile nexus is an abstract and experimental mode of mediation, which allows for an exchange between different ontological orders. As we have seen, these two models are not incompatible but coexist in online games and social media platforms. Not only do the latter mediate but increasingly reprogram social interaction, trapping users in imaginary and self-gratifying filter bubbles.

Rather than following the well-known strategies of demystifying and exposing the logic of the imaginary filter or of exiting the heavily surveilled world of social media, the chapter has considered a third

strategy, which would be based on the sharing of open reputations. In order to be implemented, such strategy would require the full socialization and commoning of metadata, which reveal the common orientations, shared personality traits, and infra-social desires of millions of users, functioning therefore as boundary objects, that is, as means of translation between different social worlds. However, the restricted proprietary access to this wealth of knowledge prevents users from understanding their own desires and affective responses not only vis-à-vis the objects that circulate within a platform but also in relation to other users with whom they share something beyond their filter bubbles. The condividual interface is nothing but the opening, or the restitution, of these means of translation to the social field. Yet the enclosure of metadata makes it difficult to envision uses that are not marketing oriented and to grasp how such uses could in turn affect the condividual management of shared reputations. Here it is worth underscoring, once again, that the creation of big data commons is not in itself sufficient to set the conditions for actual social, economic, and political progress. This is because the higher availability of data inevitably benefits those who have the knowledge, technical skills and organizational capacity to use such data to their own advantage.

In this respect, the minor experience of shared pseudonyms can be of some use. Besides showing how reputation can be decoupled from individually-owned accounts, shared pseudonyms such as Anonymous and Luther Blissett engender the mode of concatenation based on the encounter of singularities. Although these pseudonyms are open to unforeseen appropriations, recurring users such as political collectives and affinity groups define the authorizing context of the alias, that is, the set of ethical, aesthetical and political norms whereby its symbolic power is reproduced, maintained, and mobilized. From this angle, the authorizing context coincides with the condividual interface, or with a boundary subject that expresses the tension between what the alias can do (the algorithm) and what it actually does (the database of its actual uses). In this respect, a radical challenge for the software engineers of our time would be to design interfaces that may open up algorithms and metadata to users qua dividuals of an assemblage rather than as individual owners of unique accounts. What would it mean to be (de)subjectified as a dividual? First of all, it would mean to represent and accept our own existence as partial and co-dependent on those of other dividuals. Second, it would mean to accept a new sense of the limit, which would not be algorithmically set through the creation of narcissistic filter bubbles or by

an authority that transcends the social field. Instead, such limits would be directly negotiated by the parts of an interface. Such parts may or may not be in agreement, they may decide to cooperate or struggle with each other. But they would always be faced with the task of having to care for their condividual reputations and for the definition of the norms that regulate their internal and external functioning. Similarity, not sameness or identity, similarity concerning only some components.

Notes

1. Galloway (2012, 31).
2. Cited in Galloway, 32.
3. Ibid., 40.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 42.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) and Helmond (2015).
8. Latzer et al. (2014).
9. Chun (2004, 43).
10. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013).
11. Schüll (2012) and Vaidhyanathan (2018, 36–41).
12. Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2017).
13. In Lacanian parlance, the subject is the discourse of the other (Lacan 1977).
14. Slavoj Žižek (1999, 322–334) develops the concept of the demise of symbolic efficiency to refer to a suspension of the capacity of a Master signifier to stabilize meaning and prevent signifiers from floating off into indeterminacy. See also Dean (2010, 57–60).
15. Rancière (2004).
16. Coleman and Golub (2008).
17. Karppi (2018), Kaun and Treré (2018), and Hesselberth (2018).
18. Deleuze (1992).
19. Raunig (2016, 67).
20. Lazzarato (2014).
21. Kosinski et al. (2013).
22. Kramer et al. (2014).
23. S. C. Matz et al. (2017).
24. Star and Griesemer (1989)
25. See Lacan (1970, 84), Berardi (2009, 77–90), and Dean (2010, 61–90).
26. Deseriis (2015).
27. Ibid., 4.
28. Bourdieu (1991).

29. For the contradictory uses of Monty Cantsin see Bazzichelli (2013, 78–86); for Luther Blissett see Deseriis (2015, 127–163); for Anonymous see Coleman (2014, 53–236).
30. Wark (2004, ¶8).
31. Tilly (1986).
32. Raunig (2007).

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Heretical Facial Machines, or the Polyvalence of Faciality in the Politics of Digital Dissent of Anonymous

Alberto Micali

Introduction

This essay aims to advance the current understanding of digital media and network dissent within a broader framework that engages with affect for the study of media and cultural process,[1] and especially the critical approaches that contrast determinist psychoanalytic models, positing the affective dimension involving psychogenesis in the domain of intensity.[2] I investigate the relationships between "becoming Anonymous" (in the Deleuzian sense) and the resistant employment of a common moniker, signalling the centrality of the visual trigger of the face within its collective processes of subjectivation. Indeed, facialisation seems to be a key process at stake within contemporary hacktivist deployments, and this will be subsequently deepened in relation to micropolitics and a wider machinic context that implies an intensive domain.

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A Genealogy of Collective Subjectivation

Anonymous' digital resistance is characterised by the multiplicity of the media actions undertaken under the same moniker.[3] However, such a multiplicity, by its very nature, exceeds any taxonomic attempt to analytically arrange and classify its various forms of networked media interventionism—and this even though actions such as so-called Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS), data leaks, web defacements, and the public release of codes to avoid surveillance and circumvent censorship surely have been the most common and widespread weapons within the arsenal of Anonymous' digital dissent. Networked media actions of resistance—or *hacktions*, as I have called them elsewhere[4]—employ the processuality of the hack within an aesthetic register of de-subjective creativity that reduces the distance between social and technological agency, aiming to produce systematic disruptions as the active resistances—or insurgency—of a media ecological dysfunctionality.[5] A performative reading of digital media and networks typifies these processes of mediation, and does so beyond a limiting representationalism that instead presupposes: (1) media as separated prostheses of the (social) human-animal; and (2) media as the outputs of a symbolic separation that operates on another—epistemological, rationally meaningful, simulated and/or signifying, etc.—plane.[6] Processes of mediation intensively act in the co-constitution of culture (as a sphere that is not strictly significational and antropopoietic), and Anonymous surfaces as a clear manifestation of the heterogeneity of resistance in digital cultures.[7]

From a representationalist perspective, Anonymous ultimately ends up being treated as *just* a hacktivist network: a distributed community of hackers/geeks and/or activists that take advantage of the pervasive distribution of digital media technologies.[8] Once media technologies are no longer apprehended as a mere extension of social animals (tools to represent social and political dissent), and a plane of ontogenetic co-constitutionality is re-established, digital media and networks become a battlefield in which subjectivation and its involvement in the political sphere are crucially at stake. Indeed, what I call the heterogeneity of resistance in digital cultures points towards a political arena that, in the terms offered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,[9] is fundamentally "micropolitical".[10] This is a sphere in which the production of subjectivity becomes itself the centre of political conflict. It constitutes a politics of flows of

partial subjectivation, and individual and collective processes of individuation that move underneath—but at the same time might shape and exert an influence on—the macro-politics that are constituted by the practices of institutions, parties, and/or political communities of differing scales.

In the light of the burgeoning presence of digital technologies as co-constituent or partial vectors of human subjectivity, the problem of subjectivation, particularly in relation to the collective employment of "improper names" and (in the specific case of interest here) the Anonymous moniker, has been approached by Marco Deseriis.[11] According to Deseriis, improper names are a varying continuum that conceptually includes its two poles of orientation: the strongly centralised one of collective pseudonyms (which are often characterised by top-down usages), and the decentralised one of multiple-use names (which can instead be indistinctively appropriated by the many). Deseriis investigates the relationships between improper names and subjectivity via the work of Deleuze and Guattari on subjectivation,[12] and connecting this with the problematic of the processes of individuation as investigated by Gilbert Simondon.[13]

On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari led and progressed the anti-determinist critique to the Freudian/ psychoanalytic subject (and its relation to power),[14] in alignment with, and extending the work, of Michel Foucault.[15] Rebutting the idea of subjectivity as being stable and determinable (which can then be studied and known in full, as psychoanalysis pretends to do), the movement to a notion of subjectivation as a process of constant production highlights the possibility for a creation that does not precede this same act of productivity. It is here that, within a broader ecosophical perspective,[16] media can indeed become a differential of subjectivation, entangled with different ecological registers.[17] On the other hand, Simondonian individuation attempts to oppose the hylomorphic scheme that still rules the core of Western thought by introducing a domain of intensity into the otherwise ontogenetic conception of being.[18] Indeed, the problem for ontogenesis comes from a tradition that has always placed the individuated before the process of individuation. This happens, for instance, with hylomorphism, in which form dominates the transformation of matter, causing the fall of ontogenesis into a matter that is already presupposed. Rather, in Simondon's proposal, individuation—and the influence on Deleuzo–Guattarian ideas is as such evident—never resolves itself without implicating the transition from a phase of intensity (or pre-individuation).

Conjugating these two traditions of understanding subjectivation and individuation, Deseriis recognises Anonymous as a "multiple-use name".[19] This is defined as a "decentralized and possibly uncoordinated use of an alias".[20] According to Deleuze and Guattari, collective enunciation implies both pragmatic and symbolic expressive formations (that is, both the performativity and representational functioning of language).[21] This means that a distributive independence of these two lines exists since they both operate on the same plane (which in Deleuze and Guattari's proposition is always an immanent one). Improper names, then, do not represent, and these collective forms of enunciation are not simply the result of, a collective process of subjectivation. On the contrary, subjective processes—both individual and collective—continually relate to the name, possibly individuating and activating a wide set of actions (thus the domain of intensity is involved). The improper name is a collective configuration of enunciation that is able to articulate semiotic and pragmatic systems. However, as Deseriis argues, individuals relate to it—and either produce their subjectivation, or they are produced as subjects—in a conflicting yet resolutive way: firstly, as a process of individuation that subtracts certain features from the production of the self, but also as a "positive contribution to the assemblage".[22] This indicates that, under the Anonymous moniker, subjects actively contribute to shaping such a form of collective enunciation, albeit by renouncing part of their individual self-constitution: addition and subtraction meet by shaping the outcome of such an encounter and the name intensively functions in the production of novel individuated forms.

Furthermore, Deseriis strongly underlines the distinction between collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names.[23] Whilst these are both improper names and, as previously stated, form part of the same continuum (that is, they both are radical collective forms of subjectivity), it is only multiple-use names that allow minor processes of subjectivation. Multiple-use names guarantee the continual proliferation of differences; they permit—it is possible to further argue—heterogeneity on an ontogenetic level of individuation. Therefore, Anonymous is a multiple-use, improper name, employed by a large number of individuals *and* (that is, in conjunction with) digital technologies of mediation in order to deploy a wide range of media actions of network resistance, whilst—and this is the main focus of this essay—also implicating other "machines", other degrees of intensity that do relate and overlap with multiple-naming ones, enabling a zone for a potentially different production of subjectivity.[24]

These are different machines that function via their autonomous operations, offering a key site for political resistance through digital media and networks. However, before delving into such machines and exploring their relationships to the face as a privileged site for subject formation, it is necessary to maintain the focus on the resistant use of multiple names in order to imply key issues about contemporary power. Indeed, the actual historical phase is a decisive conjuncture in which the logic of control is reaching an unpredictable climax. This is a movement of depletion of life forms and perpetual data-matter extraction by means of an "ecologisation" of power apparatuses: the distribution of technologies (such as sensors or cameras) that do not simply "record" but continually capture data and extract new patterns via ever-evolving statistical models in order to self-balance, govern, and address the outputs of existing systems.[25] The becoming-environmental of power—following the stage of bodily internalisation through the disciplines of modernity—was already glimpsed and approached by Foucault in his lectures,[26] and Deleuze's reading of them.[27] More recently, the facets of this latter stage of control have been analysed via theoretical proposals such as algorithmic governmentality,[28] pre-emption,[29] or machinic enslavement.[30] Now more than ever, the Deleuzian indication that we should look at "the basis of the 'struggles' of each age, and the style of these struggles" in order to comprehend the diagrams of contemporary power becomes of vital importance.[31]

The facial machines of Anonymous are a style of their own, which emerged within such a conjuncture and continue a genealogy of past struggles that have made of collective processes of subjectivation and enunciation a key trait of distinction.[32] Recognising the banality of the fact that anybody can be Anonymous is a truism that unintentionally seems to imply the transversality of processes of subjectivation and the intensive force of those of individuation. "*Encyclopedia Dramatica*" (ED), a satirical wiki that is a direct expression of contemporary digital cultures, proposes an interesting definition of Anonymous. The micropolitical dimension introduced above seems to underpin this encyclopaedic-like, wiki-entry description of Anonymous, which offers some preliminary clues via which to grasp the hacktivist resistant forces shaping its becomings. The encyclopaedia states:

> Anonymous is NOT a group, or an organization, or coherent collective of any sort. Anonymous is more like… an idea, a concept. Technically everyone and anyone is Anonymous. It's simply the name given to any

> collective action carried out virally by a large mass of people. Its ranks, goals, intentions and ideals are completely fluid, changing as easily as the wind. It's a kind of social ocean that occasionally builds itself up into a massive tsunami of sheer social willpower.[33]

This definition underlines the fluidity of the forces moving within Anonymous. These forces horizontally parallel those of abiotic phenomena (wind, streams), often erupting in tornados and floods—as may occur when specific media actions such as digital swarms or gigantic data leaks are deployed and/or exposed as a massive form of digital media interventionism.[34] As such, a movement contrasting an external attribution that imposes a representationalist take from the outside is at stake in the entry. However, this movement is not fully grasped, even though a micropolitics of flows as partial vectors of subjectivation, and the glimpsing of a non-human category of intensity, is indirectly hinted at.

Tatiana Bazzichelli offers a decisive step forward: an additional and helpful effort to read Anonymous that equally points towards the forces traversing and shaping its active resistances.[35] To introduce the hybrid subjectivations of Anonymous, Bazzichelli brings us to a field of dandelions: "A dandelion seed head enables wind-aided dispersal over long distances. When the wind blows, the seeds leave their original location and drift off; they dissolve into the air and re-emerge somewhere else".[36] These two attempts to define Anonymous, offered by ED and Bazzichelli, move on a similar non-metaphorical plane. They do not work analogically, whilst seeking to grasp the various forces that led to the set of relations that might have actualised, and still actualise, Anonymous' individuations and collective processes of subjectivation—as improper multiple names do. However, it is only the latter that does not presuppose and assign an exterior attribution to the Anonymous, and—at the same time—equally emphasises contagious diagrams and the central position of vectors within them. Flower seeds, wind, streams of water, and/or non-human animals such as birds can be vectors; in the cultural phenomenon of Anonymous, digital networks are the main vectors of partial subjectivation, and the possibility of approaching such subjective processes does not elevates itself through a hierarchical movement to the outside, but follows the same deployment of the multiple-naming machines—their self-organising movement, their machinic autopoiesis.[37]

Following this "internal" line of argumentation, Bazzichelli links Anonymous to other cultural expressions that she, in a similar way to its

internetworked and distributed hacktivism, defines as "networked disruption".[38] In particular, she connects Anonymous to various practices of employing a collective moniker to de-mystify the bourgeois cultural logic of immutable identities and subjectivities. This is a subversive line of practice that, once investigated, allows Bazzichelli to associate the case of the Neoist movement, or that of Luther Blissett, with Anonymous' hacktivism.[39] Both Neoism and Blissett, express the importance that collective monikers have in the field of art, implicating an ambit that is aesthetic. Here, authorship and originality are central mechanisms for the commodification of the artwork, channelling art "pieces" to enter into (amongst others) commercial practices of exhibition, promotion, global, and national trade. In the cases of collective monikers, in accordance with the Deleuzian reading of Nietzsche, the question shifts from the possible individual understanding of "who" is behind the name (and the artwork), to a de-individualised "who" (which is again the problem of the forces that underpin the emergence of such forms); a question that attempts to challenge ruling mechanisms, such as that of authorship.[40] From this viewpoint, the question concerning Anonymous becomes one about a dandelion-like "event": an ongoing process that, by continuously recurring, is capable of relating to the forces that populate and traverse it, intensively involving those lines that have yet to come (individuation is, in fact, always metastable, to employ again the Simondonian proposal). In addition, the aesthetic field is implied as a privileged ambit for the constitutionality of such relations—for the encounter of the various resistant forces—thanks to the doorway that perception offers to the intensive order.[41] Rather than a representationalist referent that externally defines Anonymous processes of subjectivation, Bazzichelli attempts to map a movement that comes from the same unfolding of the active resistances at stake, following a genealogical line of descent or, further, its phylogeny.

The *Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerilla* (Handbook of Guerrilla-Communication) is a collective book by the autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe, Luther Blissett, and Sonja Brünzels.[42] It provides a map/collection of various "tactics of joyful agitation and playful resistance to oppression" (according to its subtitle). In the text—which anticipates the lines of investigation that have been developed by Deseriis[43] and Bazzichelli[44]—one section is dedicated to the "magic" of collective names, which works by nullifying the space between the individual and the collective. These previously introduced nominal forms thus run as mythic machines: signs without signifiers—or, conversely, full of the infinite chain of the

possible meanings that can be attributed to them.[45] Collective names are the implosion of any binary, as well as external attribution under infinite referents; through them, the allure of the name is reinforced as a mythic character by each singular gesture, action, or narration, whilst simultaneously, individuals gain strength by sharing the collective dimension.[46]

According to the collective authors, the praxis of employing multiple names by the many traces its lineage via a complex descent of active dissent. In 1514, in Württemberg (a region of southwest Germany, at the time Duchy of Swabia), a peasant revolt was conducted under the collective name of Konrad. Peasants rebelled against harsh taxation imposed on them to solve the debt crisis of the Duchy and, although they were defeated, the collective effort led to the peasant war of 1524–1525.[47]

The line of descent moves to the beginning of the nineteenth century, this time in England, where General Ludd became the imaginary leader of the uprisings against the mechanisation of the textile production process. Ludd was the inspirational character collectively employed to resist the beginning of industrial capitalism. The general was not a commandant, but a concatenation of the desiring forces and actions of resistance against a new form of fixed capital. Ludd did not represent an organised movement. The fiction of political representation occurred later, when the separation between collective and individual action in the work process was institutionalised by the liberal state: a political separation to legally manage the refusal of exploitation under the guise of salaried work.[48]

Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, another multiple-mythic machine was collectively activated in Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos was a spokesperson for the people of the Chiapas region, but no one seems to have ever seen his/her face. “It” became a name/face, additionally adopted outside the Mexican region, to oppose neoliberal flows of capital invested worldwide thanks to the burgeoning position of information and communication technologies, thereby connecting a wide network of local struggles. Marcos was more than a multiple name: a collective visage fostering a multitude, refusing hierarchical binarisations and the abstraction of identity-making processes.[49]

Anonymous can be linked to both Konrad and Marcos, positing its digital resistance on a phylogeny that had actively opposed the emergence of always-new power relations at decisive historical conjunctures. Nonetheless, the hacktivism of Anonymous must be further considered in the light of the radical changes that occurred with the mass diffusion

of digital networks—vectors that are continuously shaping the nature of the apparatuses of power as well as the resistance to them in contemporary internetworked societies. In particular, at the turn of the millennium, the multiple-use name of the Subcomandante signalled the decisive bifurcation to the visual culture that will be: the networking, current degree of saturated circulation reached within the so-called "pictorial turn".[50] Within such a lineage, and particularly after the first visual traces left by Blissett, Marcos has in fact been amongst the first to rely on the global distribution of digital networks, opening a collective space that is not only a name for an international of locally based actions of resistance, but that is crucially entwined with cultural elements that visually shape, constitute, and establish the face as a site of possible global resistance. Whilst the Subcomandante was a symptom of the surfacing of innovative resistant machinations to oppose (at the time new) power relations that were geographically more dispersed and led by novel informational vectors, Anonymous relates to such a resistant lineage by precisely building upon the continuation of this digital-networking, capitalist-led expansion. The hidden face under the balaclava offered a worldwide visual trigger, yet it is with the Anonymous' face/mask that the phase of culmination of a saturated visual circulation matches the insurgent forces of political resistance. Within Anonymous, the collective face is one of the central sites of struggle for political subjectivation; a micropolitical issue that acts beyond, and in combination with, the strategic practice of the multiple-use name.

Therefore, I propose that the hacktivist becomings of Anonymous equally involve what Deleuze and Guattari defines as machines of facialisation: the possible diagrammatic composition of traits of *visagéité*.[51] Anonymous prolongs a lineage of resistant forms that have made collective processes of subjectivation a distinguishing signature, even though this phylogeny bifurcated when the centrality of the network-circulating image began to dominate the global internetworked imaginary. The mythic machines of collective, plural names—which give and deprive the individual and collective dimensions of the self—are aligned, and in some ways overlapped, by machines that turn to the face as a strong subjective component. In the next section, I will detail the functioning of such machines, attempting to offer novel reflections regarding the correlation between the machines producing visages and the interconnected digital landscape. Such considerations will, in fact, permit me to deepen the issue of relations of power, and the forms of digital media and network

dissent that today populate over-developed societies.[52] Anonymous is an identity to be shared, a political collective, an activist/hacking or even a terrorist group, when is approached via the attributing dispositions of social subjection: despotic machines that constantly need a face to separate and define themselves, establishing external points of attribution as the dominant value of reference.[53] *The faces of Anonymous are not many; the face of Anonymous is one*.

The Face Is a Politics!

The problem of the visage, particularly in relation to the production of subjectivity and a broader examination of power and capitalism, occupied part of both the solo and collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattari.[54] Within a broader network of concepts, Guattari developed the one of faciality (*visagéité*), in connection to a more comprehensive critique of signification and its dominant position in the understanding of psychogenetic processes.[55] Deleuze, instead, applied the idea to cinema and painting—and, more specifically, by focussing on cinematic techniques such as the close-up,[56] and Bacon's portraiture.[57] It is particularly on the former, Guattarian line of inquiry that I wish to focus my attention, in order to better grasp the relationships between the employment by Anonymous of a well recognised, widely networked, circulating face/mask and its entangled processes of subjectivation. This line of reasoning, led by Guattarian investigations, finds its most comprehensive argumentation in one of the many plateaus of the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.[58] Within the overall aim of understanding the processes entailing the face within Anonymous-becomings, I push this argument further, particularly by broadening it towards the internetworked landscape.

To begin with, Guattari frames the problematic of the visage within a critical account of signification and in relation to a broader take on abstraction that aligns the rule of signifying semiotics with capitalistic modes of command.[59] Schematising to the extreme, as capital establishes itself as the measure of economic exchange—an autonomised pole of reference that rules and over-codes the other modes of regulation—signification similarly hierarchises and neutralises semiotic pluralism, transcending the signifier as a reigning value; a pole that subsumes polyphonic enunciation (which for Guattari pertains to the domain of existence and not just the act of speaking). Whereas in Karl Marx's historical materialist

critique of the capitalist regime, capital operates as a general equivalent, autonomising its transcendental position of reference through so-called "exchange value"—which abstracts "use value" and makes of all goods a commodity beyond their intrinsic differences[60]—Guattari reads the same operationality in other processes of neutralisation of, and hierarchisation over, the plurality of the dynamics of existential differentiation.[61] This happens in the case of signification and within the capitalist regime, but the origination of absolute and autonomous poles of reference also involves other spheres of valorisation: it applies (amongst others) to the aesthetic field with the value of beauty, as with the good of moral within ethics, and/or the liberal law of the bourgeois in the sphere of public life.[62]

This critique thus extends towards psychogenesis and the broader problem of subjectivation, and does it by building upon the comparison between the modes of capitalistic general equivalence and the representational pretences of psychoanalysis, which externally attribute signifying—reductionist and intelligible—components to subjectivity. In its early conceptualisation, the facial is described as a machine that captures the plurality of semiotic components, reducing the wide variety that might compose subjectivities—that is, neutralising their heterogeneous becoming by attributing a generalised equivalent. On the side of the intersection between psychoanalytic practice and the rule of capitalist societies, the former imposes its equivalent by reducing subjectivation and the related processes of faciality as a matter of acknowledgeable signifying traits: "The 'thing' is identified, located on various abstract coordinates, grasped, prevented from fleeing or escaping the system of significations, and kept from threatening the reigning socio-semiotic order".[63] As such, Guattari never conceives of visage*s* as representational, even though the broadcast media of his time used to produce factory-like, dominant facial traits.[64] The problem, according to his argument, does not involve the possible alienating identification of selves with such ruling visages—an identity-making mirroring exercised by the ruling faces of his time.[65] Rather, the core problematic is the way in which the heterogeneous components of desire, the partial vectors of subjectivation, or—to broaden the scope again—the polyvocality of all the expressive components that might potentially offer an *ouverture* to the subjectivations of the world, and their possible becoming-other thanks to the encounter with multiple existential territories are reduced to standard, intelligible points (dominant faces) that catch and flatten them to a standardised value

and, moreover, can only be understood via subjugating significational traits.

In *A Thousand Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari progress early reflections on faciality, detailing and offering some of the most interesting remarks on the concept.[66] Amongst these, I want to touch upon a line of reasoning that seems to offer the most productive path via which to address the micropolitical problem of the common visage within Anonymous. This thread engages with the relationships between the face and the landscape, permitting a re-evaluation of processes in which the former is entailed within the networked informational paradigm. Visages are, indeed, bound tightly to the production of the self: the face allows subjectivity to emerge, coming from an abstract machine that combines the white wall (on which signification projects signs) and the black hole of subjectivation (in which selves constitute via intensive energies).[67] A system of surfaces and holes hence shapes visages, which are explicitly described as never pertaining to an individual domain of the self, but rather to "zones of frequencies or probability" in which redundant traits tend to capture the real (again, in its differential becoming) and preliminarily conform it to dominant significations.[68]

Key correlations exist between the surfacing of the face as one of the leading sites for the production of human subjectivity and the landscape: the relationships between faciality and landscapity (*paysagéité*).[69] The face, indeed, does not fully correspond to the head, but is the result of a movement that projects the latter towards the surrounding milieu, thanks to an intrinsic relation with this space, the landscape. The face must always be considered in connection to a landscape, which allows it to become the dominant chart as introduced above. Here, the perspective is (again) an intensive one that reads bodies beyond their strict circumscription to human ones, and—above all—beyond a possible organicistic and static comprehension. Rather, bodies are the result of a stratifying movement of the material axis and the intensive merging of affective forces.[70] Again, via Simondon, bodies are a metastable, temporary result of intensive processes of individuation,[71] and the face represents the culmination of their historical sedimentation, since the head is taken in an absolute movement with the milieu that surrounds and orients it.[72] Since evolution is an always-relational process of differentiation, the face materialises as a leading zone from which human subjectivity can emerge when the head of homo, abandoning for the first time the milieu of the forest, encounters the flat horizon of the steppe.[73] Such a co-relation with the

open horizon of the steppe allowed the head to extend, transforming and historically stratifying that which is the visage, which is then, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the outcome of an absolute movement: "an absolute deterritorialisation... no longer relative because it removes the head from the stratum of the organism, human or animal, and connects it to other strata, such as those of significance or subjectivation".[74]

Yet what happens when the face is further projected towards a new horizon? How is faciality reoriented within the landscape of digital networks, a hyper-technological milieu that, accessible by screens and led by increasingly complexified algorithms and ever-expanding databases, additionally abstracts existential territories, throwing the face towards an interconnected horizon that runs via a 24/7 market-oriented, capitalist platformism?[75] Indeed, that which entangles the Anonymous face is a transformed landscape in comparison to the steppe and, we can argue, the evolutionary leap activated by it equally adapted and evolved. The capitalist circulation of visage*s* across networked platforms, and in particular the burgeoning visuocentrism of human cultures, further pushes the conjunctive and co-constituting relationality that exists between the face and the landscape.[76] The landscape into which contemporary processes of faciality are taken, is no longer that of urbanised modernity, but is rather the highly pixel-defined and interconnected range of experiences in the "cyberspace"—an entangled sphere of human individuation, a post-modern realm of continual colonisation, the always-expanding frontier of capitalist dominion over the subjectivations of the world. This is, in the words of McKenzie Wark, the milieu of the vector that, "indifferent of the qualities or meaning of what it transmits", configures a "terrain of addressable spaces... in which data and commands can be routed in principle between any addressable" point,[77] tending to the continual extraction and drive of all life forms that were, are, and potentially will be.

Within the already introduced conjuncture of the ecologisation of control, the digital networked landscape stratifies novel faces, which are taken in a movement that captures, re-arranges, and matches them in order to reinforce contemporary power machinisms. Today, Deleuze and Guattari's remark that "the face is a politics" has never seemed so clear-cut.[78] It is a politics because, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, relevant matters of power involve the face, in particular its arrangement, and its possible, active dismantling. In archaic societies there was no

need for faces; masks were often able to bestow a body with its collective belonging. The polyvocality of subjective components traversing the social collectives could find actualisation in different relational forms; masks were often central in rituals, coalescing in their traits the intensities that were vitally moving in-between social relationships. In contrast, in highly hierarchised societies, power relations are in continual need of visages and, in over-developed ones, this necessity goes far beyond the two modes of functioning of the facial machine described by the French thinkers: (1) selecting to separate; as a central order that produces the unity of a visage in order to dualistically oppose to alterities (i.e. teacher and student); (2) forming intermediate categories in order to homogenise deviances; as a grade of tolerance that does not immediately separate, but gradually tends to integrate and comply with dominant traits, creating zones of segregation (i.e. ghettos or Christianisation).[79] Within the post-modern ambit, facial machines meet the culminating phase of control, offering unprecedented possibilities for its anticipatory and predatory logics in the domain of individuation, and the intensive triggering of dominant (human, white, masculine, heterosexual, urbanised, capitalist, etc.) processes of subjectivation.

Visages become harvested maps for large businesses and security apparatuses from which facial traits can be inferred and recomposed to self-maintain the systems, and the machines they are, or might be part of.[80] Faces cease to be simply dualist others separated in order to define dominant traits, and/or marginalised frequencies ready to be homogenised. The intensities that constitute visages as zones of indeterminacy are increasingly anticipated by acts of capture and the interpolation of patterns, which address the virtuality of the same processes of subjectivation, reducing the degrees of such an indeterminacy and functioning as inputs within increasingly complexified machines of faciality. Following the neoliberalist logic and the extreme self-entrepreneurial push towards a sort of dividual hyper-individuality, the de-regulation of facial traits enters the landscape of the ecologisation of control, fleshing out its securitising apparatuses and their increasing widespread distribution.

Concluding Remarks: On the Polyvalence of the Anonymous Face/Mask

In the first part of the essay, I introduced relevant studies investigating the relationship between processes of subjectivation and individuation, and the active resistances that have made use of multiple-use names as a distinctive form of opposition and rebellion to ever-evolving power formations. Anonymous continues a phylogeny of practices, but faces the challenge launched by the global circulation and saturation of visual imaginary through the means of digital media and networking technologies. Facial machines, as sites of micropolitical conflict, are maps of subjective production that reduce, capture and address actual and virtual processes of individual and collective subjectivation, functioning as one of the key apparatuses of contemporary power.

Nonetheless, the Guy Fawkes mask has become one of the most used and recognised marks in the repertoire of Anonymous, allowing it to frame its amorphous activities in what can be seen as a refrain of collective individuation. The aesthetics of the mask—implying the production of subjectivity at multiple semiotic registers—and consequently Anonymous' micropolitics of media dissent, is surely not simply a visual matter. It is a stratagematic attempt to actively resist despotic facial machines, whilst stimulating novel individual and collective forms of subversive media action and practice, which means—as well—keeping the field open to virtual possibilities for differential individuation on the domain of existence. The stratagem of the mask works as a refrain by crystallising the active forces that may find "form" in the indexing processes of faciality. The visual is deeply involved, since the mask is recognisable mostly through signifying semiotics—the white wall. However, as also suggested by Guattari, who explicitly makes reference to the refrain in relation to faciality,[81] the face/mask is a refraining point that can catalyse and mobilise the forces traversing Anonymous-becomings—the black holes of subjectivation—the active resistances constituting the subjective processes of Anonymous. Refrains emerge, in fact, from chaos and as such are a way of stabilising the multiple emergence of disordering tendencies. In these terms, the refraining of the mask opens Anonymous to collective processes of subjectivation, acting on the contingent "eventfulness" of the social and correspondingly guaranteeing anchor points within the chaotic and multiple becomings of its active resistances—and of the many expressions and practices of digital media interventionism involved.

When initially reflecting on the functioning of Anonymous facial machines, I had been thinking of a clear ambivalence between the need to resist a despotic facialisation, and the possibility of actualising such a resistance by implying the same operationality of the face. However, the facial machines of Anonymous only partially overlap with the modes of operation of those that constitute multiple names—that is, oscillating between a dialectic resolution of individual subtraction and collective addition. Instead, the intensive politics of the digital dissent of Anonymous implements a heretical stratagem that has been taking advantage of the contingent conditions of its emergence, activating a white facial machine with the black moustache that serves as a catalyst; an existential refrain that is able to index various resistant dispositions.[82]

The Anonymous-becomings that are still unfolding worldwide are processes of subjectivation partially and actively triggered by the same abstract machine of faciality.[83] The resistant forces shaping such becomings find their encounter within a visual chart that is the face/mask; a refrain that is thus capable of activating subjects differently and seems to favour the formation of novel processes of individuation through the relations occurring with digital media and networks. As such, rather than ambivalence, the visage of Anonymous seems polyvalent, since at a molecular level, it exhibits more than simply a dualist state of valence. Indeed, in the field of chemistry valence expresses the combinatory power (power to or *potentia*) of atoms to relate to one another.[84] It is a sort of relational degree of elemental components that might (or equally might not) intensively enable the constitution of novel individual and collective productions of the self. The molecular, following the Guattarian line of reasoning, is a field of mutation, the terrain upon which the micropolitical conflict over subjectivation will always be open.

The Anonymous stratagem of the heretical facial machine allows facial traits to escape by forming dense ranks of connections wearing a mask. If facial machines are machines of command—redundancies that binarise and make of language an order capable of separating and defining alterities to exclude these, capitalising on this separation and configuring dominant subjectivities—then there is no longer time for non-facial machines. In internetworked, over-developed societies, the despotism of the face is the rule, not the exception.[85] The nostalgic time of a past without visages, of tribes and societies without language and state, only offers new reactionary faces, such as those sought both by fundamentalisms and nationalisms. Today, it is not possible to escape from the

commanding capabilities of facial machines. The aesthetics of the mask of Anonymous implies a facial machine that does not look back, yet challenges the abstract configurations constituting itself. It does so through subjectivations and enunciations that are themselves plural: a sort of collective call to arms, which is directed towards active forces of resistance.

Notes

1. Clough and Halley (2007), Gregg and Seigworth (2010).
2. Deleuze (2001), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Guattari (1990, 1995), Massumi (2002, 2015).
3. For an in-depth analysis of Anonymous' hacktivism, see Coleman (2014).
4. Micali (2017).
5. I developed this concept of hacktions as digital media actions of resistance in order to processually recharge the power-to of abstraction of the hack beyond its subjective and objective-centred operationality. In particular, I wanted to offer a movement against a dualist perspective of resistance, addressing it through a critical post-humanist framework that is capable of stressing the ontological heterogeneity of digital media and network interventionism. For details, see Micali (2017).
6. For a critique of representation in contemporary cultural and social theory, see Barad (2007) and Thrift (2007).
7. Micali (2016).
8. In particular, it seems "social software" takes centre stage of the mass distribution of digital media and networks. For details, see Manovich (2013). Similarly, the growing academic interest in design and interfaces seems to be one of the most productive ways to address the relationships between the human–animal and technological mediation.
9. Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987).
10. For a groundbreaking introduction to the micropolitics of contemporary digital cultures, see Terranova (2004).
11. Deseriis (2012, 2015).
12. Esp. Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987) .
13. Simondon (1958, 1989).
14. Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987), Guattari (1995, 2011, 2013).
15. Esp. Foucault (1995, 2002, 2005).
16. Guattari (1995, 2000).
17. Fuller (2005). Guattari developed schizo-analysis as a pragmatic approach precisely to contrast the power-enmeshed and positivist determinism of psychoanalytic practice. As he details in the glossary of schizo-analysis, this "refuses to fold desire over onto personological systems; and challenges the efficiency of transfer and interpretation" (Guattari 2006, 421). For an

overview of the evolution of Guattarian schizo-analytic metamodelisation, see Watson (2009).
18. Simondon (1958, 1989).
19. Deseriis (2012, 2015).
20. Deseriis (2012, 141).
21. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
22. Deseriis (2012, 155), see also Deseriis (2015).
23. Deseriis (2012, 2015).
24. There is not here the space to fully deal with the concept of the machine and a broader machinic ontology in Deleuze and Guattari's work. For details see Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1986, 1987), Guattari (1995).
25. For a recent analysis of the neoliberal rationality that rules such systems, and a key understanding of the subjectivations that are produced within them, see Dardot and Laval (2013).
26. Foucault (2009, 2010, 2014).
27. Deleuze (1988, 1995, 2018).
28. Rouvroy and Berns (2010, 2013).
29. Elmer and Opel (2006, 2008), Grusin (2010), Massumi (2007, 2009); then, on to power, Massumi (2015).
30. Lazzarato (2014).
31. Deleuze (1988, 44).
32. For a discussion of the cultural logic of digitality in relation to control, see Franklin (2015). For a discussion of the emergence of control as a leading paradigm of contemporary societies, see Beniger (1986). For a recent development in relation to ecological thought and the ecologisation of power, see Hörl (2017). Tiqqun (2001, esp. 40–83) deeply inspired my discussion and understanding of the relationships between cybernetics and control.
33. Encyclopedia Dramatica (n.d.).
34. Micali (2018a, b).
35. Bazzichelli (2013).
36. Bazzichelli (2013, 138).
37. Guattari (1995).
38. Bazzichelli (2013, 135–147).
39. The Neoist movement was one of the first examples of a multiple name in the arts. It was founded by Monty Cantsin (another collective alias) in 1979, before quickly spreading from Canada to Europe and Australia. The Luther Blissett Project (LBP) began in 1994, based on the principle that anyone could be Luther Blissett, simply by using the name. In Italy, the project developed around the underground context in Bologna before spreading in the rest of the country and Europe. For details see Bazzichelli (2013), and Deseriis (2015).
40. Deleuze (1983).

41. There is not here the space to fully deal with a question of aesthetics; Deleuze and Guattari (1994) offer a bridge to the intensive domain of affect via the conceptualisation of "percepts". Similarly, Guattari (1995) focuses on the aesthetic ambit as a site for positive subjective openings, offering his ethico-aesthetic paradigm. As such, I always imply the aesthetic of the mask as a question of intensive formation, of machinic triggering, and not as a simple issue of visuality and signification.
42. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. (1997).
43. Deseriis (2015).
44. Bazzichelli (2013).
45. Speculatively, it is possible to claim that such machines are a low theory that already implies post-structuralist critiques of representationalism. In this sense, they are a sort of ethico-aesthetic praxis of anti-separateness.
46. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. (1997).
47. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. (1997).
48. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. (1997), see also Deseriis (2015).
49. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe et al. (1997).
50. Boehm and Mitchell (2009).
51. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
52. I employ the adjective "over-developed" to describe contemporary capitalist society in order to align with the critique offered by the Situationist International.
53. Since I began my research on Anonymous one of my main objectives has precisely been to avoid the external attribution of social categories to the subjects involved in its becomings. Indeed, inspired by Maurizio Lazzarato's reading of Deleuze and Guattari, I attempted not to mimic social subjection, which precisely operates by attributing individual subjectivities that are functional to the division of labour. For details, see all Lazzarato's works and in particular Lazzarato (2014).
54. Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Deleuze (1986, 2003), Guattari (2011).
55. Guattari (2011).
56. Deleuze (1986).
57. Deleuze (2003).
58. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
59. Guattari (2011).
60. Marx (1996).
61. Guattari (2011).
62. As such this essay implicitly deals with the (ethico)-aesthetics of the face in the context of Anonymous, attributing to it a peculiar position in the triggering of certain processes and relations. For details, see especially Guattari (1995).
63. Guattari (2011, 77).
64. Guattari (2011).

65. In this sense, Guattari's proposal strongly distances itself from the tradition led by Max Weber's concept of "charismatic authority," which works via identification with a leader. Traits of such a mirroring that lead to the formation and identification of the self can be equally found in Gustave Le Bone's and Sigmund Freud's theoretical proposals, respectively, of the collective (crowd) and the individual (ego). Instead, Guattari aligns more to Gabriel Tarde's microsociology of beliefs and desire. For details, see Weber (2019), Le Bon (2002), Freud (1960), and Tarde (1903).
66. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
67. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 225) summarise the research conducted by American psychology on the relationship between the mother and the child with a particular emphasis on the *visage*. Moreover, in his research on affect, Guattari (1990) prolongs the research on attunement conducted by Stern (1998), particularly on the preverbal subjective formation of the infant via her/his pre-rational activation through the vitality affects relating to the mother. The recent developments of the research on mirror neurons might be seen as a continuation of such a line of inquiry, even though the implicit reference to "reflection" fosters a psychogenetic boundary more than an opening towards a vital and contagious imitation.
68. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 168).
69. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
70. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
71. Simondon (1989).
72. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
73. The term "homo" is generically employed here to critically address the range of species that compose the human-animal constellation, contrasting the reductionist position that equates human-animals only with the sapiens species and instead acknowledging the coeval existence of different species, their hybridisation, and the involvement of non-human alterities in anthropopoietic processes.
74. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 172; *transl. modified*).
75. For details on the never-sleeping routines of late capitalism, see Crary (2014); for a discussion of platformism, see Srnicek (2017).
76. For a discussion of circulation in relation to the neoliberal logic, see Dean (2009).
77. Wark (2012, 205–208).
78. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 181).
79. Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
80. An interesting instance that I was approaching during the writing of this essay is the dataset *Diversity in Faces* (DiF), which was released by IBM researchers at the beginning of 2019 (IBM 2019). The dataset is composed of one million annotated human facial images and, despite the scope of advancing research in the field of facial recognition, signals the

further movement into which faces—and the related processes of extraction of facial traits—are being taken in contemporary societies. The dataset is based on faces sampled from another publicly available dataset of one hundred million images (YFCC-100 M), which were harvested in 2013 from photo-sharing platforms such as Flickr, taking advantage of Creative Commons licences and raising public concerns—particularly from those people whose faces were captured and crunched (Metz 2019; Thomee et al. 2016).

81. Guattari (2011).
82. During the first Anonymous street demonstrations in 2008, participants began to make themselves both recognisable and unrecognisable through the widespread use of Guy Fawkes masks. The first Anonymous street masquerade was organised as a precise response to the fear of reprisal from Scientology. According to the video released by Anonymous at the time to prompt and organise the protest, covering the face was one amongst many rules on how to manage participation to street demonstrations. Therefore, the face/mask as a facial machine emerged as a precise stratagem to resist the eventual retaliation from the Church, even though the Guy Fawkes imaginary was already part of the meme culture of the "/b/ random" image board on 4chan since 2006. On the relationships between stratagems and emergence see Fuller and Goffey (2012).
83. An example that I was investigating while writing this essay is the launch in the night of October 28, 2018 of "Operation Black Week" (#OpBlackWeek) by Anonymous Italia (together with the affiliated hacktivist networks of "LulzSecIta" and "AntiSecIta"). The operation consisted in seven days of different media actions—such as web defacements, data dumps, and leaks—against many public and private servers of Italian institutions and organisations (Anonymous 2018a, b). The operation had the objective of exposing the fallacy of national cyber-security systems, as well as triggering participation in the Italian Million Mask March march, which took place in Milan at the end of the same week.
84. For a theoretical and historical overview of valence bond theory, and particularly its resurgence as an experimental method within quantum chemistry, see Shaik and Hiberty (2008).
85. According to the 2018 data of the World Bank, more than half of the world population has, nowadays, access to the internet.

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Impersonal Identity: Enacting the Online Self Beyond Networked Individualism

Daniël de Zeeuw

To the hegemonic rise of social media platforms in the last two decades, there also corresponds a new configuration of the online self, one that is more readily compatible with the socio-economic imperatives of what has recently been theorized as platform or surveillance capitalism.[1] In this new configuration, digital interaction and identity are (re)imagined in terms of an ideology of 'networked individualism'.[2] Facebook can be seen as exemplary of this new configuration of the online self as a user possessing and enacting a persistent personal identity. In the walled garden of 'friends', on Facebook all content is tethered to personal profiles and organized in algorithmically personalized newsfeeds. Beyond the confines of these commodified platform ecologies, however, there continue to exist various alternative vernacular practices and enactments of online interaction and identity. These can be seen, first, to derive from the three main affordances that characterize imageboards such as 4chan, namely anonymity, ephemerality, and contingency,[3] and second, as expressing a cultural commitment to the values of an earlier formation

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of web culture. Together, these features of what I call the 'deep vernacular web' (de Zeeuw 2019; de Zeeuw and Tuters 2020) shape the dominant media practices of this part of the anonymous internet.

This raises the following questions: what kind of alternative online selves are constructed in these anonymous and ephemeral environments? To what extent are these self-enactments antagonistic to the dominant social media culture? And why would that matter? The current chapter tries to answer these questions by looking at various subcultural tropes that originally circulated *on* 4chan but that are also *about* 4chan. It is due to their vernacular origins and their self-referentiality that these tropes serve as a starting point for understanding how its users imagine the practices they engage in, as well as how they construct their online identity, both on an individual and on a collective level. In what follows, I first situate 4chan within the larger transformations of the internet in the previous decades, showing how social media platforms have marginalized an earlier formation of web culture centred on the kinds of anonymity and collective identity play that sites like 4chan continue to foster. The second and third sections look at the Anon/Anonymous pseudonyms, the Guy Fawkes mask, the stock avatar, and the naked obese man meme as enacting an impersonal sense of self, engendering a mode of 'anyone-subjectivity' and collectively forming a 'grotesque media body'. Together, I argue, these enactments of the online self on the deep vernacular web yield a sense of identity that, in contrast to social media, is *im*personal rather than personal, and as such serves to historicize and denaturalize the increasingly dominant modes of sociality and identity prevailing on platforms like Facebook.

Mask Versus Face Culture

Described as 'a discordant bricolage of humour, geek cultures, fierce debates, pornography, in-jokes, hyperbolic opinions and general offensiveness',[4] 4chan was set up in October 2003 by then fifteen-year-old American high school student Christopher 'moot' Poole with the aim of providing a simple, low-cost, and easily accessible way for English-speaking fans to exchange and discuss Japanese anime.[5] The site's code and design were inspired by (and largely copied from) the highly popular Japanese imageboard repository 2chan.[6] Its earliest user base consisted mostly of goons, as users of the North American comedy forum Something Awful were called. From 2003 onward, 4chan quickly established

itself as the most popular of English-language imageboards. In the following years, it became one of the central places to cultivate a festive and mock-affirmative disposition towards online anonymity, understood as an anti- and impersonal mode of sociality and culture that is collective, ephemeral, and authorless—and, in that sense, nameless and faceless. This is particularly true for the only board on 4chan that does not have a definite theme, or whose theme is that it does not have one: /b/ Random. Geared towards ephemeral encounters with anonymous others with little or no moderation, /b/ gave rise to a vibrant male youth subculture steeped in Japanese anime, video games, warez, hacking, porn, gore, trolling, comics, and memes.[7]

In contrast to social media platforms like Facebook, imageboards like 4chan cultivate a set of media practices that are anti- and impersonal rather than personal; ephemeral and aleatory rather than persistent and predictable; stranger- rather than friend-oriented; and radically public and contagious, rather than privatized, filtered, and contained.[8] As a remnant of an earlier internet consisting of various 'digital other-worlds'[9] that has been gradually overgrown and marginalized by social media platforms, 4chan is at the centre of a loosely coherent network of sites catering to users interested in engaging with strangers. While large parts of the internet have succumbed to the logic of platformization,[10] anonymous imageboard culture remains mostly untouched by the hegemony of platforms, in terms of its infrastructure and design, its (sub)cultural sensibilities, and its revenue model (which is antiquated if not absent). Starting from the assumption that '4chan and social media are divergent ends in a spectrum of Internet experiences',[11] this section seeks to contextualize where and how these different configurations of the online self came into being, from the perspective of the larger transformations of the internet in the last two decades.

To a large extent, the difference between the self cultivated on 4chan as anonymous and ephemeral, and the self cultivated on Facebook as personal and persistent, depends on the way identity and anonymity are constructed and negotiated online. More than simply denoting unidentifiability, in the context of 4chan anonymity signifies a condition in which every name becomes a pseudo-name, and every face is transformed into a mask. Whereas 'today, the most ubiquitous online communities are social networks where our identities are mostly known and mostly persistent', imageboards like 4chan hinge on 'the intentional disconnect between one's real life and one's online persona'.[12] It is this aspect of

online anonymity that links it to identity play (as the latter's enabling condition)—a form of play that, moreover, links 4chan to an earlier configuration of the web, whose practices of anonymity haven been mostly eclipsed by social media platforms. Offering 'a space for playing with unrestricted notions of identity and affiliation',[13] 4chan's ethos of dissimulative identity play partakes in a longer online tradition of what David Auerbach refers to as anonymity as culture, where 'masquerade is an integral part of social interaction'.[14]

By contrast, Facebook has become 'a synecdoche for the "real-name", anti-anonymity movement'.[15] Zhao et al. also label Facebook an essentially 'nonymous' environment, adding that, as a result, 'people are more likely to present their selves as being in line with, or close to, normative expectations'.[16] One of those expectations is that you present yourself in line with who you 'really' are outside of the platform, or what could be called Facebook's authenticity imperative.[17] In the new paradigm of online interaction and identity that Facebook and similar platforms promote, anonymity is associated with inauthenticity and irresponsibility, insecurity, crime and terrorism, cyberbullying and trolling, pornography, piracy, hate, and bigotry.[18]

Evoking *The New Yorker* cartoon by Peter Steiner that for many people sums up the ironic and playful spirit of early web culture, 'On the Internet Nobody Knows You're a Dog' (5 July 1993), Wendy Chun observes how 'In the first decade of this century, with the advent of Web 2.0, the Internet has become a semipublic/private space of "true names" and "authentic images". […] In this semiprivate or semipublic space, freedom stems not from anonymity, but rather from knowing who is a dog and who is not'.[19] Instead, 4chan's 'mask culture' is historically rooted in the web-native ethos that Steiner's cartoon describes, where to put on a mask or take on a fictional name is to enter a virtual space of appearances temporarily disconnected from the realm of instrumental interaction and the social imperatives of authentic self-presentation, where you are expected to present yourself as you do in 'real' life—even when, as Skeggs and Yuill found, 'the contemporary neo-liberal imperative to perform and authorize one's value in public is more likely to produce a curated persona rather than the "authentic" self-demanded by Facebook'.[20]

On 4chan, the mask signals a different idea of what it means to be authentic online than does the face in Facebook, as it is about pretending to be someone you are not, or saying something you do not actually believe, or daring to share. As Simcoe observes:

> The rise of web 2.0 and the enclosure of the digital commons that accompanied it has threatened the capacity for anonymous interaction online and rendered hegemonic the notion that speech on the Internet should be rational, transparent and equivalent to speech elsewhere. In response, the activities of 4chan users and the broader anonymous culture can be viewed as an attempt to rearticulate the Internet as a space of fluid identity, dissensus and play.[21]

Consequently, to be authentic in mask culture means to be *inauthentic* in face culture, as the mask embodies the imperative *not* to be true to yourself. However, the alternative idea of authenticity in mask culture does not so much undermine the modern conception of authenticity as a form of being true to the self but rather articulates a *different* idea of what this self entails. That is, the self to which mask culture remains 'true' is the multiple, anonymous, fluid, and playful self of early web culture and imageboards like 4chan, rather than the personal self of social media platforms. To be authentic in mask culture thus means to be true to anonymity as culture, i.e. to the spirit of dissimulative identity play online.

What for Chun represents a banal and impoverished idea of friendship grounds this move 'from the thrillingly dangerous and utopian "cyberspace" to a friendlier, more trustworthy Web 2.0'.[22] Platformization marks 'the capturing of digital life in an enclosed, commercialized and managed realm'[23] that provides authenticity through authentication in order to 'save users from dangerous strangers'[24] roaming the web's undergrounds. At stake here is a fundamental restructuring of the internet (and of the way it is imagined by its users) from a strange new global space of ludic and anonymous interaction that is radically open, chaotic, and, as such, pregnant with many contrarian possibilities, to a filtered and commercialized safe-space of verified user profiles in line with people's existing personal, social, and professional lives. Yet, if online interaction originally produces an experience of the self as anonymous, ephemeral, and fragmented, and if it thereby drifted to practices of role-playing and multiple identities, why has this nevertheless not become the dominant socio-cultural paradigm online? Moreover, why has the apparent opposite of this paradigm become dominant instead? In an attempt solve this riddle, both Chun and Lovink point to the concerted attempt by social media companies to transform the internet into a more consumer and business friendly environment that allows for the creation of well-defined, high-resolution data doubles linked up to users' real identities.[25]

Considered as providing the social and cultural templates that allow a new form of platform capitalism to thrive, this new 'face culture' interpellates the online individual as a personal user and configures their social interactions as the graph of measurable events occurring between similar users in a social network. Located at the point where they intersect, the notion of the individual and the network are central to what can be deemed the digital ontology of the new platform ecosystem. What the above riddle demonstrates is that the making and remaking of the user to fit a certain vision for online interaction and identity—where 'the [personal] profile is the a priori part and the profiling and targeted advertising cannot operate without it'[26]—involves not only the development of new infrastructures but also the willingness of the user to identify on a highly personal level with this construction of their online activities. This willingness must be constantly (re)produced through the user's inscription in a variety of sociotechnical milieus. It entails 'the massive rehabituation of individuals into authenticated users'.[27] Platforms thus actively nudge users into adopting this sense of a personally unique, individual self as their own, seeking to make users 'habituated to owning their connections so that a relatively solid longitudinal data set, which follows individuals and individual actions through time, can emerge'.[28]

Enacting the Impersonal Self

In 2006—notably the same year that Facebook was opened to the general public—users active on 4chan's /b/ Random board started to refer to themselves individually as Anons and collectively as Anonymous. What these users effectively did is to pretend *as if* all posts and replies on /b/ were written by a single user, based on the fact that the default user name on 4chan is Anonymous (Fig. 1). By engaging in this playful act, 4chan users implicitly recognized and personified the essentially collective and impersonal dimensions of media creation and circulation on 4chan. This led to the attribution of the Anon/Anonymous label to users' *own* messages as well, which thereby were no longer properly their *own*, but became an expression of the whole of 4chan. Rather than only seeing the digital other as anonymous, users came to understand themselves as anonymous, which is quite unique in terms of conventional understandings of identity formation, where identity is taken to emerge from the expulsion rather than the introjection of otherness (or the 'unknown'). The self of Anonymous, then, is the self as an other to an other, i.e.

Fig. 1 Screenshot of a 4chan thread with the default user name anonymous used by (supposedly) different users (by author, 10 February 2019) (http://www.4chan.org/b/)

it suggests a perspective on itself *from the outside*, rather from its own intimate self-knowledge, in which only the other can appear as such. By referring to themselves as Anons, 4chan users thus named and rendered visible something otherwise quite abstract and seemingly insubstantial: the worldwide interaction of thousands of strangers in a conversational whirlwind of posts and replies, texts, links, and images. What initially started as an in-joke among /b/ users thus became the basis for a new subcultural identity.

The Anon/Anonymous pseudonym can be seen as an enactment of the radical anonymity that I argue characterizes imageboards like 4chan. Beyond its opposition to 'real name' identities on platforms like Facebook, radical anonymity must be differentiated from anonymity as pseudonymity. The latter can be considered anonymous in the sense that it severs the online persona from the person's real identity, but it continues to function as a name by providing authorial coherence to multiple individual speech acts. Radical anonymity also breaks the authorial coherence across speech acts that is functionally retained by the pseudonym. The only pseudonym that does retain radical anonymity is the kind that is open to, and can be used by, anyone because in that case speech acts can no longer be aggregated in terms of a single identifiable author. The Anon/Anonymous moniker is a pseudonym of this kind, as the Anon of one post can be the same as that of another, but it can also someone else.[29] Moreover, whereas interactions on Facebook are all recorded, analysed, and built into an individually curated timeline, discussions on 4chan quickly disappear, leaving no trace except for the embodied cultural memory of Anons. Given this ephemerality, we may indeed 'think of 4chan as a big roll of butcher paper on a conveyor belt that users scrawl things on as fast as they can before it goes into an incinerator'.[30] What survives the incinerator becomes part of a collectively rather than individually narrated history, in which vernacular know-how acts as a medium of subcultural belonging.

Radical anonymity's detachment of speech acts from the individual user has the effect of relegating each post to the total body of posts, and of conferring a form of authorless authorship onto it. This is one of the reasons why 4chan came to be understood by its contributors as 'a schizophrenic soliloquy, where a single user named Anonymous carries on multiple conversations with himself'.[31] The disambiguation of the speech act from personal identity, by which it comes to be inscribed in the larger and impersonal social text, is acknowledged by 4chan's FAQ page, which

states that 'Anonymous is not a single person, but rather, represents the collective whole of 4chan'.[32] The same idea is articulated in a piece of comic 4chan weblore that shows a naked and extremely overweight man seated in front of a computer. The caption below the photograph reads: '4chan: 87% of the posts are written by this man' (Fig. 2). By suggesting that a large majority of posts on 4chan are the result of the activities of one man, rather than of thousands of individual users (as is of course actually the case), the image acts as a mock-affirmative representation of 4chan as a 'grotesque media body'. Again, this way of imagining how content is created and circulated on 4chan starkly contrasts with how online interaction is configured on platforms. The latter conceives of online interaction as a network, where the nodes are comprised of distinct individuals, and the edges represent the social relationships between them. Facebook's login page exemplifies this way of representing the web (Fig. 3). In the

Fig. 2 '4chan.org: 87% of the posts are written by this man' (accessed 1 November 2016) (https://cecinestpasdelart.wordpress.com/tag/there-is-porn-of-it/)

Fig. 3 Screenshot of Facebook's login page (accessed 2 September 2019) (https://www.facebook.com/FACEBOOK-is-my-Homepage-129502847065316/)

network, the spatial distance and separation between the nodes in the network is not so much an *obstacle* as an *enabling* feature of 'connectivity'—a separation that is absent in the body of the naked obese man, where each speech act is immediately reabsorbed and dissolved into the collective discursive flesh. There is thus an 'ascetics' of networks, for which the cutting and preventing of connections is just as crucial to establishing 'connectivity' as procuring them.[33]

As another enactment of 4chan's impersonal identity, the stock avatar image (Fig. 4) also ludically misappropriates the well-known images that social networking sites use as placeholders for a yet to be uploaded profile picture, claiming the absent face as the anonymous face of 4chan. Whereas on social media platforms the generic silhouette of an unknown user is supposed to nudge users into adding a unique profile picture, the stock avatar instead conveys the anonymous, impersonal sense of identity that

Fig. 4 Early representation of Anonymous on 4chan, displaying a faceless stock avatar (accessed 4 September 2018, cropped) (https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/19866-Internet-hate-machine)

4chan fosters. If Anon had a portrait, it would perhaps look something like this avatar: a portrait of no one in particular, yet somehow still able to speak.[34] Claiming the faceless face of the stock avatar as the face of 4chan thus undermines the personalized, networked individualism that

social media platforms promote. Instead of appearing as the latter's necessary but irreconcilable 'before' that is to be substituted by an identifiable face, the avatar, in being adopted indefinitely, threatens to replace the face, or at the very least to put it in its place as only one of many possible iterations of digital subjectivity and community.

Lastly, the Guy Fawkes mask similarly enacts the identification with the faceless and impersonal nature of interaction on 4chan. Acquiring its 'hacktivist' significance in the context of the Anonymous movement from 2008 onwards, the mask actually made its first appearance on 4chan in the guise of a comic stick figure named 'Epic fail guy' in 2006 (Fig. 5).[35] Epic fail guy is a shared persona created and used by anons to label various kinds of failure on the part of others and themselves. The image forms part of a common practice on 4chan of collective anonymous storytelling, where each user adds a new scene to the story as the thread develops, beginning with the original poster (OP). Looking at the backstory of the Guy Fawkes mask, it not only signifies anonymity but also the playful and dissimulative aspects of the imageboard subculture, as going against the 'reality imperative' of platforms like Facebook. If the mask in 4chan's case symbolizes an affirmation of impersonal masquerading beyond the confines of 'real life', the face in Facebook instead signifies its emphasis on users as unique individuals, whose profile mirrors their personal and professional lives. Moreover, as a trope the Guy Fawkes mask is indebted to the carnivalesque significance of masks as enabling an immersion in

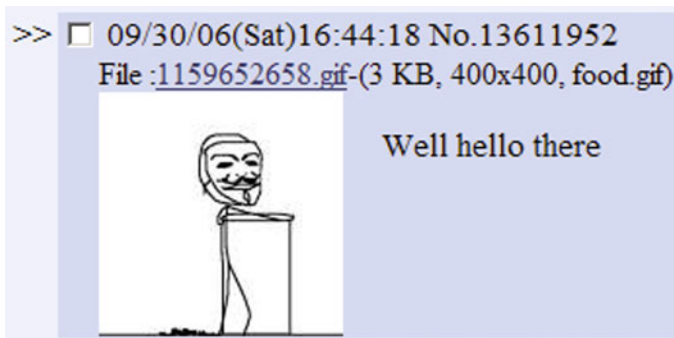

Fig. 5 Screenshot of the original Epic fail guy thread on 4chan's /b/ Random board (uploaded 30 September 2006, accessed 28 August 2019) (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/epic-fail-guy)

the undifferentiated body of collective festive speech, to which the naked obese man meme attests.

Anon as Anyone

In their mock-affirmative cultivation of the impersonal character of online interaction on the deep vernacular web, the three tropes discussed so far strongly contrast with social media's individualizing logic and personalizing modes of address. Platforms like Facebook forestall precisely this identification with the impersonal and collective dimensions of online interaction. Instead, it pushes users to exclusively identify with their own speech acts. Referencing the early internet, Judith Donath takes the presence of a persistent persona to be a necessary condition for establishing any kind of real community online:

> Purely anonymous individuals are capable of communicating with each other, but there is no accretion of personal histories in their interactions: reputation of any kind is impossible in a purely anonymous environment. The motivation for many of the qualities we associate with community, from cooperative behavior to creative endeavor, depends on the existence of distinct and persistent personas.[36]

4chan, however, shows that the absence of 'distinct and persistent personas' does not preclude a sense of belonging and its associated virtues, like cooperative and creative behaviour. At the same time, Donath's observations do cast light on why 4chan generates a strange and paradoxical kind of community, one whose bond is constituted through the absence of any (lasting) bond, and whose identity is established as having no identity (a paradox conveyed by the name Anon/Anonymous, as a name that is no name). If there is an identifiable bond on 4chan, it is to be located not in the relations of recognition between individual users or their personally accrued reputation, but in the links between utterances in a common vernacular and shared forms of life, one that cannot be traced to any definite group of users but still forms a chain of signification that establishes a sense of belonging.

Inspired by Maurice Blanchot's question of 'what corresponds to the "Who?" of the everyday',[37] who then is this 'Anon' as the subject of the 'digital everyday' on 4chan? Who (or what) is this fleeting yet ubiquitous quotidian figure encountered in passing and circumscribed negatively by

not belonging to our circle of friends, family, or colleagues? What is this negativity that is nevertheless still held in common by everyone as their bondless bond, a form of coexistence that never crystalizes into either community or identity? Moreover, how is it possible, as 4chan users seem to do, to identify yourself with the anonymous other, as being similar to this other, so that what you recognize in them is precisely *your own* anonymity, i.e. your own otherness to those who are other than, but precisely in that respect similar to, you?

The protagonist of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930–1943) may serve as an example of such a seemingly impossible identification with anyone as the anonymous and impersonal subject of everyday life. A mathematician with a keen eye for the law of large numbers, Ulrich comes to see himself as 'a trivial item in some vast equation of forces'.[38] His thoughts and feelings seem to belong not to him personally but to 'a great complex of events robbing them of any essence by which they might be called his'.[39] Living a surrogate existence, his 'self' has become that of 'anyone': 'he lives not only in the scientist but in the businessman, in the administrator, in the sportsman, in the technician'.[40] What Ulrich thus experiences is an anonymous sense of himself as interchangeable with others, and as having only a statistical reality, where 'our personal motion-to right or to left, this way or that "is of no consequence to the average value"'.[41] His sense of reality has become the opposite of that of 'normal' people, for whom the sensually evident and particular are primarily real, and who maintain a personal rather than impersonal sense of self. In Ulrich's post-anthropocentric world view, only statistical, generic, invisible, and mediated entities possess reality, whereas the empirical here and now (including the individual person) is but an insignificant particle pushed around by these more abstract systemic forces.

This movement of an identification with the impersonal—which, as a mode of self-understanding, approximates the actual way people are treated in the modern circuits of market exchange and the bureaucratic apparatuses of the state—also undermines the personalizing mode of address of mass media like radio, which 'adopted a conversational mode of address that spoke to listeners as if each was a person in his or her own right'.[42] Radio addresses the viewer in her individual, isolated listening situation, *as if* she were being spoken to personally. At the same time, it is clear that this cannot really be the case, since the radio broadcaster—herself isolated in the studio—addresses an indefinite audience

of unknown listeners. This is what Scannell calls the 'for-anyone-as-someone' structure of mass media, which are 'heard, seen or read by millions (by anyone and everyone) and yet, in each case, it seems, they speak to listeners, viewers or readers personally, as individuals'.[43] To be a 'correct' listener, each audience member must navigate a double bind, acting *as if* the host is genuinely addressing her personally, while at the same time knowing that this cannot really be the case.

What both Ulrich and tropes like the Anon/Anonymous pseudonym and the stock avatar have in common is that the residual awareness that this is 'not really the case' may leave space for a heretical identification with the impersonal modes of address that media generally rely on. The same could be said of Facebook, which, although contrary to mass media it does have access to the user as an individual, and actually 'speaks' to it by way of algorithmic personalization, nevertheless treats its users as numbers, statistical realities algorithmically probed for their preferential attachments and predictive capacities, to be packaged and sold to advertisers,[44] revealing social media's 'ideology effect' as it upholds the fantasy of the user as You.[45]

Unaffected by this effect, images like the stock avatar express the 'someone-as-anyone' structure of anonymous imageboards like 4chan, opposing the someone-as-someone modes of address that characterize social media platforms. Whereas the personal profile picture has the soothing but largely illusionary effect of suggesting a personal presence on the other side of the screen, Anon's faceless face has the uncanny effect of invoking an impersonal presence: identity is announced, anticipated, yet absent. In the empty hole where a face should be, a curious subtraction seems to have taken place, hinting at something before and beyond the act of individual self-identification. The individual person is not (yet) there, but there is still something that 'holds' its place. The stock avatar does not address the viewer personally, and does not let itself be addressed in this way. There are no eyes or other features from which it is possible to infer agency; yet it is not a thing either, as it still *addresses* us; it is an indefinite presence from which an unknown speech may spontaneously burst forth, the voice of no one in particular. Like Ulrich, by dropping any particular proper name and exploding the face into a thousand interchangeable masks, the tropes discussed in this chapter have internalized the dissociative and deindividuating forces of global digital media systems, including those that actually govern platforms like Facebook.

Conclusion

As mock-affirmative instances of the impersonal media practices that characterize the deep vernacular web, the Anon/Anonymous pseudonym, Guy Fawkes mask, stock avatar, and the naked obese man image register a way of inhabiting the web that is fundamentally different from the mainstream web of social media platforms. In exploring these tropes, I build upon the way they circulate as markers of the subculture's embrace of 4chan's ephemeral affordances and stranger-oriented practices. By contrast, the figure of the face represents a diametrically opposed ideal of being online. As a symbol of persistent personal identity, individuality and authenticity, the face is employed by the social media platform most rigorously committed to it, namely Facebook.

In the preceding sections, I somewhat left open the question of the relation between the pseudonym, mask, and stock avatar as enactments of an online self that belongs to anyone and thus to no one, and the naked obese man as an instance of the grotesque media body. This relation, I suggest, can be seen as one of mutual implication and reinforcement. What I mean by this is that not having a face (or having a generic, faceless face that is anyone's) becomes a precondition of participation in the collective festive body: the latter can only emerge out of multiple any-bodies that never quite harden or crystallize into definite somebodies. Just as, conversely, the conflation and confusion of individual users in a single obese body prefigures the ability to become 'anyone', to temporarily deliver oneself over to an impersonal existence. In this case, anonymity signifies a form of undifferentiated group life, an impersonal collectivity,[46] revealing how 'our personal subjectivity is founded upon an obscure, impersonal, and anonymous existence', in which 'it is not truly I who perceive; rather, perception "happens" and something "is perceived"'.[47] In one of his last essays, Deleuze develops the concept of 'a life' as a way of describing this impersonal existence that precedes and exceeds the determination of the person, where rather than being this *one*, one becomes *many*: 'one can be this or this or this, and this and this and this'.[48] In the phrase 'a life', the indefinite article represents 'the indetermination of the person'.[49] Deleuze uses the figure of 'a life' to argue that 'We are always *quelconque* – we are and remain "anybodies" before we become "somebodies"'.[50] In his account of this figure, John Rajchman describes it as follows:

> There is a certain indefiniteness in this life of the any-body, which is in stark contrast with the particularities that delimit us as definite somebodies [...] each of us has a body in this indefinite sense, each of us is an anybody or is capable of becoming anybody. The indefiniteness of corporeal being is thus impersonal yet quite singular: to have a body, to be able to become anybody, is in fact what is most peculiar to each of us, even though it never reduces to anything particular about us.[51]

The tropes that I analyzed in this chapter can be said to disclose precisely this indefinite life that is irreducible to, and in excess of, the personal, and that concerns what is interchangeable and shared by everyone, yet belongs to no one. In these tropes, then, the transpersonal and diffuse being of everyday life is thematized as a mode of being that I participate in with others, taking up the bare *factum* of coexistence as a being-in-common, an existence without identity. It is this mode of being—as celebrated by both early web and contemporary mask culture—that is threatened by the new face culture of social media platforms, in a way that undercuts the internet's radical promise of a profane (because absolutely playful) relation to identity and the *détournement* of existing senses of belonging: to appropriate the digital everyday in the mode of anonymity, as the collective body of anyone.

Notes

1. Srnicek (2017), Zuboff (2019).
2. Wellman (2001).
3. Bernstein et al. (2011), Knuttila (2011).
4. Knuttila (2011).
5. Beran (2019).
6. Coleman (2014, 41).
7. Auerbach (2012), Coleman (2012), Phillips (2015).
8. While it is true that public pages and open groups have become quite popular on Facebook in recent years, these pages generally still enforce terms of engagement anchored in personal user profiles and feeds visible only to approved "friends".
9. Dibbell (1998, 11).
10. Helmond (2015).
11. Knuttila (2011).
12. Auerbach (2012).
13. Knuttila (2015, 24).
14. Auerbach (2012).

15. van der Nagel and Frith (2015).
16. Zhao et al. (2008, 1831).
17. Social media platforms are typically focused on personal or professional self-expression, all of which 'favor the idea of people having one transparent identity that they disclose online, releasing habitual behavioral data and personal information in the process of socializing' (van Dijck 2013, 200).
18. Nussbaum and Levmore (2010), Nagel and Frith (2015).
19. Chun (2016, 107).
20. Skeggs and Yuill (2016, 380).
21. Simcoe (2012, 46).
22. Chun (2016, 13).
23. Hands (2013, 1).
24. Chun (2016, 103).
25. Chun (2016, 109), Lovink (2011, 40).
26. Lovink (2016).
27. Chun (2016, 58).
28. Chun (2016, 57). Where Lovink understands the personal profile as the a priori of social media platforms, Chun introduces the concept of YOU as the essential subject-object of new media, which she rebaptizes N(YOU) media. Corresponding to this idea(l) of the YOU is the notion of the network as that which not only exists between YOUs but actively constitutes them. In its paradoxical capacity to connect by separating and separate by connecting, this new network episteme can be said to realize Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal dictum that there is no society, as the nodes and edges that together comprise the network dissolve any substantive sense of the social.
29. For Marco Deseriis (2015), collective pseudonyms—or what he calls 'multiple-use names' like Anonymous—serve as 'improper names' that institute modes of sociality beyond the person, and as such are conducive to a 'condividual' mode of existence. As he demonstrates, many experiments with such forms of collective anonymity can be found in the arts: the Luther Blissett Project, for example, invented an open persona (Luther Blissett) that could be used by anyone.
30. Pearl (2015).
31. Simcoe (2012, 28).
32. "Who is 'Anonymous'". 4chan. www.4chan.org/faq#culture.
33. As Chun and Friedland (2015, 5) show, the technical protocols that underlie networks are promiscuous and "leaky", "dirty" and even "slutty", in the sense that they open up to more connections and capture more information than is necessary (or even good) for their application.
34. One of the dictionary definitions of "impersonal" is the grammatical sense of 'denoting the verbal action of an unspecified agent and hence used

with no expressed subject'. "Impersonal". *Merriam Webster Dictionary*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impersonal.

35. In the existing literature on 4chan, the Anonymous pseudonym and the Guy Fawkes mask have been predominantly discussed in the context of Anonymous as an online hacktivist group, but not yet in the context of the opposition between mask and face culture. As Gabriella Coleman (2014) describes it, these political usages of the Anonymous moniker became increasingly detached from 4chan, and known to the general public in relation to various freedom of information, whistleblowing, and other activist campaigns across the world. With some notable exceptions that includes Coleman's study, existing research has neglected the earlier vernacular meaning of the mask and the pseudonym on 4chan in and around 2006. Whereas in the hacktivist operations of Anonymous, anonymity came more and more to be used in the more conventional technical sense, as signifying informatic invisibility or untraceability to third party actors, in the pre-hacktivist context under consideration here the Anon and Guy Fawkes mask tropes should rather be understood as giving cultural shape to the shared experience of anonymity on 4chan.
36. Donath (1998, 21).
37. Blanchot (1993, 241).
38. Sypher (1979, 71).
39. Sypher (1979, 10).
40. Sypher (1979, 11).
41. Sypher (1979, 28).
42. Scannell (2000, 10).
43. Scannell (2000, 5).
44. Share Lab (2016).
45. Chun (2016).
46. Merleau-Ponty (1968, 119).
47. Zahavi (2005, 52).
48. Parr (2010, 81).
49. Deleuze (2001, 30).
50. Deleuze (2001, 14).
51. Rajchman (1997, 160).

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Networked Participation: Selfie Protest and Ephemeral Public Spheres

Giovanni Boccia Artieri

Introduction

Social network sites and web-based technologies play today an increasing role in both individual and collective styles of political practices.[1] In particular social media has been appropriated by activists in order to disseminate social movement frames, to mobilize and coordinate for direct actions online as well as offline and to self-mediate acts of resistance.[2]

Within this context, the use of visual contents is a way to attract public and media attention and images have a positive mobilizing effect in the online protest activity.[3] Selfies represent a special aspect of the circulation of political images that have been analysed in particular in relation to political communication campaigns as a strategy of interaction between citizens and politicians and as a tool for the construction of politicians' public images.[4] But in the context of online political communication we can also observe the use of selfies by activists and citizens who share online contents that contains their self-portraits as part of a public discourse.

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In this study, I adopt an approach that brings together selfie and protest studies in order to examine 'selfie protest' as a social media phenomenon of hashtag activism most notably distinguished by the use of selfies and accompanying slogans that have come to serve as a digital form of political demonstration.[5] Based on an examination of different cases of selfie protest, I argue that this kind of connective-protest is based on micro-activism practices that balance the private dimension of the agency and public performance which transforms the public space of protest into a thematic public sphere—albeit 'ephemeral', linked to specific moments of effervescence (and as such contain potential socio-cultural resonances) and rapid dissolution—capable of activating the attention of the mainstream media and bring specific issues on the public agenda.

The overall discussion is structured in three parts: firstly, I delineate the characteristics of the political participation in the new media context and how this can have an impact in the public sphere[6]; secondly, I focus on selfie protest defining it as an online micro-activism practice. Thirdly, I analyse three cases of 'selfie protest' emerged during a research that I had done in 2013 about online activism on Twitter using a netnographic approach.[7]

Netnography is a specific ethnographic approach developed for the analysis of online spaces. It is a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of social media through the researcher's immersion in the field and netnographic participation. From a phenomenological perspective the netnographic approach makes possible, through a prolonged observation and participation in online environments, to collect data that can make the overall sense of a phenomenon.

The participatory observation of hashtag activism content flows has led to the isolation of a specific hashtag that until then had not been used by protesters: #selfieprotest. The hashtag #selfieprotest represents, according to Hine's concept, a pop-up ethnographic moment, i.e. a moment that 'seemed to capture something that was thought-provoking and insightful'[8] about the relationship between individual practices and collective participations in online activism. In this sense, while I was analysing the form of hashtag activism on Twitter, the emergence in 2013 of self-defining protests like #selfieprotest brought to my attention a further issue. I noticed a mode of protest in which people used their profile more clearly to perform one's own identity, to elaborate a relationship between

political dimension and expressive form. The use of selfies in their timeline was a way of self-positioning in the protest while revealing themselves to their followers in their everyday narration. This led me to question the closer relationship between the private and public dimensions in a public narrative of the political dimension. Selfie protests involved not only and specifically activists, but ordinary people who used protest as a reflexive opportunity in online identity building. This means, from my point of view, to place the most general reflection on the forms of online political participation within self-disclosure practices. The goal of this essay is therefore to observe the selfie protest as an online micro-activism practice that relates a private dimension of the agency to a performative public nature (rather than as a form of organized protest), trying to grasp the problematic balance that exists in this type of protest between the expressive form and the civic form. And to show the mechanisms through which a self-centred form of online expression (the selfie) can participate through the protest to the construction of a collective feeling of something shared. I will use the cases as examples for a theoretical discussion about the transformations produced by forms of personalization of protest based on practices of visibility of the self. In fact, the use of social media invites us to rewire the often assumed connections between visibility, face/body and politics in relation to the dimension of online citizenship.[9]

Social Media and the Collective Style of Political Practices

A large part of contemporary social and political theories has attempted to define the boundaries of a new public sphere in relation to the possibilities of expression and propagation of the media, with particular attention to the digital ones.[10] To define this public sphere involves observing the evolution of the media background of a society, where the Internet, particularly in the West, becomes mainstream through the dissemination and access by citizens and is used as a tool for political information and organization for democratic social interactions,[11] and the dynamics of engagement generated by this new context.

But while the Internet and digital technologies provide a public space, they do not necessarily provide a public sphere: the growth of access to information enabled by web and social media does not directly lead to increases in political participation, nor greater civic engagement or

trust in political process. Instead, users' appropriation of online public spaces can lead to the mutation of these spaces into public spheres, as the multiplication of public discourses in a wide range of online places may lead to more or less converging views on public matters. The interchange is ideally based on argumentation but may also be impulsive, emotional and mediated through various aesthetic means.[12] The online spaces facilitate the creation of different and self-enclosed public 'spheres', characterized by a plurality of topics and issues that become potentially visible and searchable. This reality reveals a variety of 'connected public spheres'[13] having the function of 'irritating' the public sphere represented by mainstream media, in the sense of causing disturbance and perturbation which will then be processed from within the media system, starting with personal micro-narratives, and sharing personal expressive messages which are potentially aggregative, for example by hashtags.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the forms of political Internet-based engagement, it is more useful to shift the analysis from the active forms of political participation in the public sphere to the tensions between the 'private' and the 'public', as these have been articulated in social media because: 'online media lend themselves to several uses, but they acquire agency as they enable the re-negotiation of what is considered private and what is considered public in public life'.[14] An ironic meme about Trump shared on Facebook, the selfie posted on Instagram of participating in a flash mob to send a message about protecting the environment, posts on Tumblr expressing one's idea about some public issue, represent an attempt to build a public agenda starting from one's own point of view which can also be in contrast with the dominant media public agenda. Elements of the private, such as personal thoughts, emotions, individual aesthetics, can become part of public discourse in the form of texts, photographs and videos shared online. In this sense, online participation—that can develop into political Internet-based engagement—starts from everyday online narratives going on within personal accounts on social media or blogs.

This dynamic could be explained as an 'evolutionary leap' in mediated participation[15] which compares, on one hand, with the evolution of a participatory culture[16] that has been developed within a communicative environment characterized by high levels of personalization and creativity and, on the other hand, the visibility of 'networked publics' practices[17] that recursively reshape online the distinction between private and public, individual practices and collective participations. Indeed, the condition

of being networked has led to a daily and constant management of the relationship between private life and public life, online and offline, close and distant worlds, in terms of a distinction which no longer depends on a spatial variable but on a user choice to balance the two terms in a state of coalescence.[18] In this sense is possible to investigate selfie protests as a way of reshaping the distinction between private and public through political practices.

Interpreting 'Selfie Protest': Between Selfie Studies and Protest Studies Perspective

The growing presence of selfies on the Web raises many theoretical issues, ranging from the use of self-portraits as an identity-building tool to its relation with the concept of genre and to the notion of the public sphere[19] Also some studies point out how digital photo sharing is contributing to the renegotiation of the public and the private spheres[20] and to the transformation of privacy and intimacy.[21] In this sense people use online self-portrait photos at once to define and record their identity and to curate and cultivate their self-presentation. More precisely, the selfie should not be considered as an act of narcissism but it represents a form of labour through which they transform themselves into digital objects in order to be taken into account within a cultural system that considers them only as body-goods: 'The selfie is both a representation of and, in the case of social media sites like Instagram and Facebook, an opportunity for the public recognition of that labour' as Gram[22] clarifies in speaking about the selfies of young women.

According to the referenced literature I define as 'selfie' those self-representation digital objects (a) that unite a textual (hashtags and the eventual caption) and an iconic dimension; (b) that are also created with an awareness of belonging to a specific genre (given by the hashtag network) and (c) that are spread among an individual's social network on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.[23] The specific nature of the selfie is determined by its framing power. In this sense the selfie is, at one and the same time: firstly a specific product of agency, it is the result of a reflexive process of self-representation/self-disclosure for the purposes of online sharing—first of all with their own social network of friends and followers; secondly, a media genre: using the specific hashtag #selfie (even when publishing an image that is not self-made) indicates a willingness to refer to an autonomous media genre—the

'selfie'—, which has been produced through online cultural practices; thirdly, a cultural signifier: the selfie performs a social function in communities where it circulates and creates specific relations when it circulates outside those communities.

In this sense, the culture of sharing and circulation of selfies shows the same patterns of the culture developed around memes. Using Shifman's argument[24] selfies as well as memes, are characterized by a gradual propagation from individuals to society, a reproduction via imitation but not simply copying—because the value lies in the use of one's own personal image—and the diffusion does not take place through competition and selection but through the aggregation around hashtags which give the selfie an added value of participating in a specific project or trend.

Going more in depth in the phenomenon, I will observe selfie protest from a general point of view as 'an emerging form of virtual demonstration whereby individuals upload self-portraits of themselves online identifying them with a political cause'.[25] More precisely if we place selfie protest in the tradition of protest studies,[26] it can be seen as a repertoire of action inspired by a logic of bearing witness, representing a specific 'mediation opportunity structure'[27] that drives activists' tactics and strategies i.e. self-mediation, in which activists take the initiative in becoming part of the media themselves by producing protest artefacts (the selfies). The emergence of this specific kind of protest represents a field that enables us to more thoroughly investigate the relationship between self-representation, self-exposure practices and online activism.

In contemporary movements of activism and protest and in the more general forms of political online engagement, the user-generated content aggregated and diffused via social media play an important role in redefining power relationship between institutions and citizens.[28] In particular, building a collective dimension of action often involves the use of personal stories, the narrative of one's own experience, the production of expressive content that describes a condition of personalized politics[29] Everyday life and domestic languages often characterize contents posted online as a way of participating in particular policy issues and of then aggregating with others through voluntary 'visibility' practices such as the use of hashtags.

This analysis, however, while considering the expressive nature in relation to the protest, does not sufficiently clarify the relationship between forms of self-representation and participation in the construction of an imagined or hoped for collective identity through the production, remix,

sharing of contents and the ways in which this process in networked spaces are related to deeper forms of self-disclosure. In fact, some scholars criticize this 'hashtag activism' as a form of slacktivism[30] that promotes causes in a self-documenting virtual way that apparently refers to political and civic engagement but in reality involves little effort. In this sense selfie protests are considered 'an exercise in self-esteem' that have 'no effect whatever on the planet, but it makes people feel good about themselves'.[31] To gain a better understanding of whether selfie protest is an extreme act of online narcissism and another form of slacktivism by 'lazy people'[32] we should put these forms of 'personalized politics' into a clearer relation with the character of the selfie as a media genre and a product of agency.

To clarify the relation between the collective logic of participation and the individualized practice of the selfie as a social media form and to bridge the analysis gap on the relationship between political engagement and self-disclosure practices, one can consider the following three specific cases of protest which have used the selfie as their own genre, that is their primary mode of organizing was to create and share selfies. As mentioned in the introduction, the corpus of the analysis consists of three cases of the self-mediation strategy of protest and have been chosen as they were the early examples of a self-defined *selfie protest*, during the observation of the field (from 2013 to 2015): the selfie protests #StrikeTheHike (starting August 2013)—against Philippine train fare hikes; #NotAMartyr (starting December 2013)—in which Lebanese youths contest the mass media and public discourse that use the word 'martyr' to describe the victims of terrorist attacks; #wrinkledwoman (May 2015)—where Russian women posted selfies with scrunched faces to protest against a top official who said that most country women 'are shrivelled by the age of 27' when defending the forced marriage of a girl under 18 to a 47-year-old man.

The netnographic approach applied to the hashtag #selfieprotest led me to follow the online traces of the three protests starting on Twitter and continuing on Facebook and Instagram and to make a content analysis of posts collected on Facebook's protest pages for #StrikeTheHike (237, from 11 to 22 August 2013) and #NotAMartyr (377, from 30 December 2013 to 10 February 2014) and of posts that used the hashtag #сморщеннаяженщина (#wrinkledwoman) on Instagram (624, from 15 to 28 May 2015).

Self(ie)-Mediated Participation

#StrikeTheHike and #NotAMartyr represent two of the first online civic protests to use the photographic and 'domestic' form of selfies together with a hashtag of the campaign. The motives behind the two political actions are different because the former is oriented towards achieving an instrumental and material impact, while the latter is symbolic in nature and aims to produce a counter-narrative towards the dominant media storytelling. But at the same time they can be compared as two similar examples of selfie protests. Both are organized by citizens through a Facebook page that collects selfies, providing precise instructions on the content to be produced: (a) indicating the online spaces in which they must be disseminated, (b) advising the hashtags to be used in order to be visible (c) orientating and aggregating contents in order to determine a collective action.

#StrikeTheHike is among the firsts to describe itself as #selfieprotest, linking a form of protest with the emerging popularity of the practice of selfie photographs, using the popularity that selfie took over in 2013.[33] A group of citizens from the Philippines who were protesting about possible price hikes on transportation, water rates and oil created a community page on Facebook[34] named 'Strike the Hike' and on 10 August launched a social media protest campaign, asking people to post a selfie with an anti-Metro Rail and Light Rail Transit lines sign (Fig. 1) to contest a possible PHP 10 ($0.23) fare increase.

The Facebook page provides detailed instructions on taking part in the campaign and the movement also produces an image of the instructions for easy circulation on social network sites (Fig. 2):

1. Just strike your best Selfie POSE with your anti-MRT/LRT fare hike signs.
2. Take your photo, POST it online and tag us on various social networking sites (Instagram: @strikethehike | Twitter: @strikethehike | FB: StrikeTheHike | E-Mail: strikethehike@gmail.com)
3. PROTEST against MRT & LRT fare increases.
   #StrikeTheHike
   #NoToMRTLRTFareHikes

It has to be noted that almost all of the posts (94%, in my calculation) is in English, this happens because of a willingness to place the protest

Fig. 1 #StrikeTheHike selfie protesters

within a media strategy, capable of addressing the mass media system—as English is the other official language of the country, used primarily in the print media as national newspaper and magazines.[35] The Facebook page republished (on the recommendation of users who wanted to be published) the contents disseminated by the protesters on Twitter, Instagram and above all on Facebook. #StrikeTheHike has succeeded in obtaining a visibility on daily newspapers in the Philippines, in particular because of the peculiarity of the type of protest capable, in the mass

Fig. 2 The instruction shared online for the selfie protest—Twitter account 'Strike The Hike', 10 August 2013

media opinion, of 're-channeling an otherwise purely narcissistic activity'.[36] In commenting on these phenomena the mass media emphasized how selfie culture contains narcissistic aspects; for example, as Inquirer.net noted about 'Strike the Hike': 'In a bid to utilize the power of vanity and the Internet, a militant group has turned the ubiquitous "Selfie" into a personal platform for protest'.[37]

This type of protest has launched a particular trend that has had visibility on the mainstream media in the Philippines and that has been opposed by The governmental House Committee on Public Information through the House Bill 4807 'Protection against Personal Intrusion Act'.[38] It was widely called 'Anti-Selfie bill' since, as a militant party-list congressman Terry Ridon claims, it also enables a person who finds himself or herself included accidentally in a group photo posted on Facebook to file civil action suits against the person who took the photo.[39] At the end of the day, the protest did not have a direct effect on the increase in the fare of trains' ticket, while it did demonstrate its ability to 'irritate' the media system, that is to cause a disturbance, through a form of grass-roots communication producing an over-exposure of the activists. Mass media paid attention to selfie campaign that united the practices of public demonstrations with the use of a self-made protest sign—a practice that is common in activism—with online activism. The digital practice of selfie was considered innovative by the media and particularly in hype: "Selfie"

has been named as word of the year in 2013 by Oxford Dictionaries. A selfie with a sign personalizes a protest campaign and at the same time shows a strong commitment from individuals. Posting a photo of yourself with a message produces a more effective statement than simply tweeting a hashtag or anonymously signing a petition online.

Today the Facebook page that organized the protest represents a multi-sectoral network of Filipino consumers against price hikes and privatization showing how there has been an institutionalization of the protest movement since the specific event of 2013, a movement that has made the #selfieprotest its style of contestation.

The second example, #NotAMartyr, was born as a spontaneous protest movement in the wake of a terrorist attack. On 27 December 2013 in Beirut a teenager, Mohammad al-Chaar (16 years old), died in a car bomb attack designed to kill Mohammad Chatah, a former Finance Minister who was deployed against Hezbollah's Shiites in Lebanon and against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in neighbouring Syria.[40] The explosion occurred a few moments after he took a selfie with some friends—in the background of the photo you can see the golden Honda SUV containing explosives, parked behind the group (Fig. 3).

While mass media focussed public opinion on the politician's death, at the same time on social media conversation took off about the fact that the teenager was being dubbed as a 'martyr' by some.

The concept of 'martyrdom' for Islam—especially under the Umayyads—represented activists who helped the group to expand its influence by their death.[41] Most importantly Islamic martyrdom has had various interpretations through time and has been framed as the activity of deliberate self-immolation in suicidal military attacks.[42] That is, 'martyrdom' has a connotation that refers to political activism, and that connects personal sacrifice to a political cause. The selfie protest campaign #NotAMartyr means that the person in question is a victim and his death cannot be exploited for political purposes masked with the use of words strongly connoted in a religious way.

On 30 December 2013 a group of young Lebanese people opened the community page on Facebook 'I am NOT a martyr' and the Twitter account @notamartyr, with the aim of launching an online campaign encouraging people to post selfies with a simple protest message, using the hashtag #notamartyr. The aim of the campaign was to express their frustration and to refuse the martyrdom tradition. As they write in the Facebook page of the protest: 'We are victims, not martyrs. We refuse

Fig. 3 The selfie with Mohammad al-Chaar (2ndL) and friends, and consequences of the attack

to become martyrs'. They refuse to 'normalize the persistent violence' by using the word 'martyr' to describe the victims. The Facebook description read:

> On December 27th at 9:35AM, 9 people were murdered in Downtown Beirut.
>
> 9 people were added to the ever-growing list of people whose lives were thrown to waste.
>
> Where does it end?
>
> We can no longer normalize the persistent violence.
>
> We can no longer desensitize ourselves to the constant horror of life in lebanon.
>
> We can no longer hide under the guise of resilience.
>
> We are victims, not martyrs. We refuse to become martyrs.
>
> What do you refuse to be? What do you refuse to see? What do you refuse to allow?
>
> Post a selfie for 2014 including a written resolution for action that you think will help us reclaim our country. Include the hashtag #notamartyr.
>
> These resolutions will serve as a public launching board to bring about debate and change in the coming years. Our goal is to collect a list of people's visions for Lebanon, large enough to make it clear that, as Lebanese, we are more aware of what needs to be reformed in our country than our apathy indicates.
>
> #notamartyr

People connected the selfies using the hashtag and #notamartyr became a trend, giving visibility to the protest.[43] Many contents belonging to Lebanese accounts were in English, giving the chance to the Western non-Arabic speaking networked publics and media to investigate the reasons for the protest. In this sense 'The campaign is directed internally in Lebanon, but is also based on the establishment of a whining argument by the selfie in order to reach and be readable by the Western media'[44] as CNN, BBC, Der Spiegel, La Repubblica etc. The protesters posted selfies on their Facebook profiles with a message often written on a hand-held sheet (Fig. 4) and tagged the page 'I am NOT a martyr' so that the photos were shared publicly even there.

We are dealing with a form of protest in which individual self-exposure (the selfie) is allied to a collective visibility of images—through using the same hashtag #StrikeTheHike, which makes them researchable within a group, even though posted in the personal timeline. The two forms of

Fig. 4 Protester selfie while holding sign

protest—although with different impact goals—share the same strategy of making visible individual instances within a collective frame starting with a personal point of view and a personal vision of the topic. We are faced with a contemporary act of self-witnessing and a public performance that indicates a specific point of view, able to operate on several registers to place the subject on the scene that documents the moment to a wider and imagined community. For example, almost all #NotAMartyr protesters[45] express their personal vision in the writings that appear in the selfies: in the relation between image and text we find personal life and protest issue intertwined. This is the case of the photograph shared by A.N., a practising diver (as he states in his profile), who shows himself immersed in the sea with a blackboard in his hand reading 'I refuse to live in a country where the only safe place is 40 meters below #notamartyr' (Fig. 5). Or E.G. who keeps a notebook on which he has written 'As a future doctor I hope that none of my patients are victims of war, bombings, politics or religion #notamartyr' (Fig. 6).

Political expressiveness and self-expression are strongly re-articulated in this form of protest that is able to combine private and intimate dimension with public and collective discourse, inviting both the public (the viewers) and the participants 'to think of identity between the self as an image and

Fig. 5 A.N. showing his statement

as a body, as a constructed effect of representation and as an object and agent of representation'.[46]

A clear example of what has been affirmed is the #wrinkledwoman selfie protest (Fig. 7).

In late April 2015, Russian mainstream media had been following the story of a 17-year-old Caucasian girl, Kheda Goylabiyeva, who was forced into a wedding with the married head of a local police department, 47-year-old Nazhud Guchigov. The Russian children's rights ombudsman, Pavel Astakhov, refused to intervene in the conflict and in an interview (with the Russian News Service on 14 May), he said that early marriages in the Caucasus were a regular occurrence: 'Let's not be prudish. Emancipation and sexual maturity happen earlier in the Caucasus. There are places where women have wrinkles at age 27 and they look 50 by our standards'.[47] Some Russian women offended by the speech started posting selfies with the hashtag #wrinkledwoman (#сморщеннаяженщина) on Instagram and Twitter.

Analysing the images and the captions of the Instagram posts we note that the dimension of the gendered power is present in this protest not only because the totality of the participants are women but also for the discursive dimension that recalls male domination. For example, I. writes 'Although by Ashtakhov's standards I have another four years, before I become a raisin #patriachy' (Fig. 8), focusing on the patriarchal ideology

Fig. 6 E.G. showing his statement

that emerges from the words of Astakhov and on the oppression of a patriarchal society in the Caucasus.

More explicit than the sexist dimension of the affirmation Astakhov and the condition of the woman in Russia is I., she accompanying the selfie I collect with this caption:

> Did I tell you Russia is extremely sexist? Some jerks do think they have the right to offend all the women and yet justify marriages of grown up men with under aged girls. One of men, #Astakhov, told that in some parts of

Fig. 7 Selfie protest against Astakhov's remarks

Fig. 8 I.'s selfie against patriarchal ideology

> Russia 27 years old women look like "wrinkled 50 y.o." thus proving it's okay for a fifty years old man to marry a seventeen years old girl. Btw, that hypocritical shauvinist is in charge of protecting children rights in Russia. I want to address women of all the world: no matter how old, you belong to yourself only. Ageing is not disgusting, men who tell you this are. You are free to do whatever you want and you are not defined by the men you have or you had. Marriage is not a top goal either as women are not just byproducts for men's use. Please radiate extreme self love.

The tone used in posts on Instagram, the confidential languages that reveal the knowledge between those who are posting and those who comment, makes me argue that the posted selfies are basically aimed at their online friends, in a public self-awareness in which these women express their positions about male domination in the culture of the country.

These examples, showing how this kind of practice represents a self-mediation strategy, can be distributed according to two variables which in the protest literature define the areas of relevance of the communicative actions of social movements[48]: the symbolic and discursive ambit, usually geared towards producing counter-narratives, and the instrumental and

material, oriented to realize immediate goals. On the side of 'symbolic impact' we find the selfie protests #NotAMartyr and #wrinkledwoman and on the side of 'material impact' we find #StrikeTheHike. However, all three cases show how the choice of using social media underlines the more symbolic nature of the protest even when it comes to protest oriented to a material goal, and how the protest orients itself in a way towards the search for visibility within the mainstream media producing a sort of 'irritation' of public sphere.

The choice of the selfie genre refers to a form of exposure of one's body and identity, taking a stand and literally 'putting your face on it' publicly, and the protesters use a specific hashtag to link up voluntarily with others, to transform their personal performance into a collective experience. The hashtags construct a connective space for 'ad hoc publics'[49] coordinated and made visible through participation in the specific hashtag and characterized by their short duration and high intensity. Starting from this performative practice, the connective structures enabled by the social media make visible a 'we sense'[50] i.e. the feeling of something shared, something that is assumed to be common because of the sharing. The 'we sense' is the awareness of sharing a common background of belonging in terms of experiences or feelings that are shared and 'felt' by the others that we place in close connection to ourselves. It is the possibility to represent oneself in public, trying to give visibility to this micro public sphere through the selfie protest within the mainstream media.

Micro-Activism and the Production of a 'We Sense'

From this viewpoint the selfie protest could indeed be seen as a self-centred form of online expression and the risk is to interpret it as a form of deep narcissism and an example of slacktivism. But we need to consider how the self-centred nature of this online expression is related to the objectives of the public sphere. In this regard, Zizi Papacharissi[51]—by citing the concept of narcissism elaborated by Christopher Lasch—speaks about civic narcissism. The term narcissism is not employed in a pejorative manner or in its pathological sense but, in the context of social network sites, must be understood as 'the ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the self'.[52] Narcissism on the web is related to the desire to control one's networked environment

born from a stronger desire for the values of self-expression. But perhaps it is necessary to move further beyond the narcissistic variable, though redefined in civic terms.

The proliferation of online content that refers to oneself indicates how the relationship between intimacy and identity has been loosened in favour of a process of extimacy.[53] Value and meaning do not lie as much in producing self-communicative fragments as in sharing them in order to have them validated by others, so to enable one reflexively, to internalize certain elements of one's world. This validation is expressed in the form of recognition of the value of intimacy fragments by Others, who are less and less on the borders of the close world and more and more generalized Others, assuming the form of an audience. This broadens the validation platform by triggering the prerequisites for communicative practices which refer to those of micro-celebrities[54]: these are practices not to be attributed to narcissism but to the multiplication of reflexive possibilities, to the increase in validation opportunities extended by an increased audience.

Conclusions

We can interpret the selfie protest as a form of 'connective-protest' oriented by a connective-action. Bennet and Segerberg argue that 'People must show each other how they can appropriate, shape, and share themes. In this interactive process of personalization and sharing, communication networks may become scaled up and stabilized through the digital technologies people use to share ideas and relationships with others'.[55] We are therefore faced with individualized orientations, whose expressive nature translates forms of political participation into 'lifestyle politics'.[56] Distinguished from collective action, connective-action is based on personalized reactions to political issues and, as in the case of selfie protests organized for material or symbolic impact, can mobilize people starting from the very visibility of the messages shared in networked spaces.

From an individualized point of view, we need to consider the relevance of the granular form of digital engagement, which is able to maintain political and civic awareness within the temporal and spatial fragmentation of everyday life. This granular nature of digital protest may lower the threshold for citizens' involvement: what the slacktivism thesis criticizes as laziness can actually be viewed as a way to facilitate participation, with more possibilities for social inclusion. It is important, therefore,

to carry out analyses that take into account the context in which protests take place and can observe the conditions of possibility (technological, aesthetic, forms of self-disclosure, etc.).

From the viewpoint of a micro–macro relation, selfie protest is a connective form of strategy to handle the tension between the public and private spheres over political and civic issues, producing ephemeral public spheres.[57] These ephemeral public spheres are visible both to 'ad hoc publics' and to mass media.

Finally, we can describe the selfie protest as a performative self-reflexive exposure in a connected media environment that develops out of a desire to take part explicitly in a social network and make it visible. Bennett and Segerberg suggest that a network created by connective-action does not require the 'symbolic construction of a united "we"'[58] while, in this case, participation is the product of a tension between the desire for social inclusion and the desire to be seen in public for what you want to be. To participate in a selfie protest has to do with a performance of the self. This refers to a logic that contemplates at the same time self-disclosure and belonging.

This connective-protest is thus based on micro-activism practices that balance the private dimension of the agency and public performance, making visible a 'we sense', a shared sentiment that develops a common wisdom capable, from a macro point of view, of producing 'ephemeral public spheres' that can 'irritate' the dominant public sphere built by the mass media.

In the end, to express a political opinion becomes at the same time a way to express oneself and validate this expression, from a space that is perceived as private. Moreover, to take part in a selfie protest exercises a dimension of agency linked to a private sphere (face, identity, biography expressed in the shot) that will be treated in public (the viewers of the hashtag).[59] We are dealing with a self-disclosure activity that occurs both for the contacts within one's social network and for a more general public. In this sense, it is a form of micro-activism that takes its traits from performances that balance expressivity and civicmindedness.

Notes

1. Dahlgren (2009, 232).
2. Cammaerts (2013, 15–33).
3. Casas and Williams (2019, 360–375).

4. Karadimitriou and Veneti (2016, 321–340).
5. Schankweiler (2017).
6. Habermas (1989, 305).
7. Kozinets (2010, 221).
8. Hine (2015, 194).
9. Kuntsman (2017, 184).
10. Papacharissi (2002, 9–27), Dahlgren (2005, 147–162), Goldberg (2011, 739–754).
11. Kahn and Kellner (2005, 75–100).
12. Papacharissi (2002, 9–27), Papacharissi (2015, 176).
13. Boccia Artieri (2012, 176).
14. Papacharissi (2008, 231).
15. Carpentier (2011, 405).
16. Jenkins et al. (2006).
17. boyd (2011, 39–58).
18. Boccia Artieri et al. (2017, 186).
19. Dobson (2014, 97–114), Lüders et al. (2010, 947–963), Iqani (2013).
20. Davies (2007, 549–564).
21. Lasén and Gómez-Cruz (2009, 205–215).
22. Gram (2013).
23. Vivienne and Burgess (2013, 279–298), Walker Rettberg (2014, 101).
24. Shifman (2014, 18).
25. Sheehan (2015, 4).
26. Della Porta and Diani (2006, 356).
27. Cammaerts (2012, 118).
28. Bennett (2008, 1–24), Dahlgren (2009, 246).
29. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 739–768).
30. Morozov (2009).
31. Will (2014).
32. Morozov (2011, 448).
33. Selfie was named Word of the Year 2013 by the Oxford Dictionaries editors, after the frequency of its usage increased by 17,000% over the previous 12 months.
34. Currently the page has been closed and the movement has created a closed Facebook group ‘Strike The Hike Movement’ with 120 members.
35. Dayag (2004, 33–45).
36. Mongaya (2013).
37. Angeli Sabillo (2013).
38. Olea (2014).
39. Olea (2014).
40. Al Arabiya (2013).
41. Kepel (2002, 286).
42. Afsaruddin (2014, 40–58).

43. "#BBCtrending: Lebanon's #notamartyr selfie protest".
44. Brager (2015, 1660–1671).
45. 85% of posts collected in my research.
46. Senft and Baym (2015, 1595).
47. Nettikkara (2015).
48. Cammaerts (2012, 117–134).
49. Bruns and Burgess (2011, 1–9).
50. Boccia Artieri (2011, 109–120).
51. Papacharissi (2002, 230–245).
52. Papacharissi (2002, 236).
53. Tisseron (2001, 180).
54. Marwick (2014, 360).
55. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 746).
56. Bennett (1998, 741–761).
57. Boccia Artieri (2012, 176).
58. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 748).
59. Vivienne and Burgess (2013, 279–298).

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Faces as Commons: The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism

Jodi Dean

Communicative capitalism names the intertwining of democracy and capitalism in global telecommunications networks and personal participatory communication devices. Just as industrial capitalism relied on the exploitation of labor, so does communicative capitalism rely on the exploitation of communication. In communicative capitalism, reflexivity captures creativity, sociality, resistance, and critique, enclosing them into mediated networks for the financial gain of investors. Within mass social and personal media networks, expressions of dissent enrich the few and divert the many. The media practices we enjoy, which enable us to express ourselves and connect with others, reassemble dissent into new forms of exploitation and control.[1]

Once we accept that capitalism is communicative and communications are capitalist, where might we find openings for critique, opportunities for resistance, and possibilities of breaking free? Differently put, if a central contribution of Marx's analysis of capitalism was his identification of the ways capitalism produces its own gravediggers, what elements of the present pointing beyond it does communicative capitalism identify?

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One answer appears in the commoning of faces, a practice that emerges out of the communicative practices of mass social and personal media. To explore this commoning, I develop the idea of "secondary visuality" as a feature of communicative capitalism. Reflecting on the repetition of images and circulation of photos as communicative practices, I present secondary visuality as an effect of communication that blends together speech, writing, and image into something irreducible to its components, something new. With secondary visuality, faces lose their individuating quality and become generic. Faces in common push back against the individualism of contemporary capitalism, suggesting a way that it is producing new possibilities for collectivity.

Secondary Visuality

Communication in social media is visually mediated. People use a wide array of images to communicate a wide array of feelings and reactions. Photographs, emoji, GIFs, and memes inhabit a regenerating commons of circulating images. In mass social and personal digital communication, images supply the raised eyebrow, sidelong glance, and disgusted grimace inseparable from face-to-face communication. Word, gesture, and image intersect, overlap, and combine: face palm. Visuals accompany and absorb text just as physical gestures augment oral communication. Using photos of others to illustrate a feeling, particularly in a humorous or ironic manner, is as ubiquitous on Twitter as the hashtag. Multiple, repeatable, and generic images are less "of" than they are "for"—for circulation in the rich media networks of communicative capitalism.

This merging of word, gesture, and image is a "secondary visuality" akin to the idea of "secondary orality." Walter J. Ong introduces "secondary orality" to describe the transmission of spoken language in a print culture.[2] Interested in the effects of literacy on speech, Ong distinguishes between the communicative practices of societies where communication is primarily oral and those where writing is dominant. While the idea of "secondary orality" remained relatively unexplored at the time of Ong's death, his characterization of orally based thought highlights attributes that feature prominently in interactions in communicative capitalism's mass personal and social media. These include:

1. Ideas are combined via addition—and, and, and—rather than in a more qualifying, supporting, or hierarchizing fashion ("although," "under certain conditions");
2. Repetition is frequent;
3. Connection with actual experience, a shared lifeworld, is more compelling than analytical connection to an abstract field;
4. Ideas express empathy and identification or their lack;
5. Ideas are positioned as poles within a field of oppositions (for or against).[3]

Ong himself mentions "secondary visualism" in an unpublished lecture he gave late in his life, linking it to virtual reality as he explores the production of immediacy and distance in electronic communication.[4] I use "secondary visuality" to designate the incorporation of images into mass practices of mediated social and personal communication. One might think of the slide from face-to-face interaction, to print (the written letter, perhaps with photographs included), to voice (telephone), to immediate text (email, SMS), to photo-sharing (Flickr), to social media incorporating writing and photos, to personal communication conducted through combinations of words, photographs, images, and short videos (GIFs). One practice doesn't replace another. They overlay and combine, changing preceding forms and practices in the process.

Communicative capitalism's overwhelming influx of messages, contributions, and demands on our attention forces us to respond, cleverly and immediately. Finding the right words to convey complicated, likely conflicting emotions, is challenging. It's hard to do it in person, in writing, and in 280 characters or less. It's even harder to do it quickly and well, in ways that will be funny, charming, interesting, or, at the very least, not inept. Emoji and other images alleviate some of these pressures. Images circulate more easily than words. They condense and displace complex, multifaceted expression. When interpretation is too hard, when making an argument takes too long, little images are ready stand-ins. This is not because their meaning is clear. It's because they sidestep questions of meaning. They keep up the communicative flow by preventing it from getting caught up, bogged down, or sidetracked into preoccupation with what it means. I saw a great example on Facebook: on a long thread filled with detailed and contentious comments, someone posted an emoji to refute another's point. The response: "Your emoji defeated

my argument. Defeated." In communicative capitalism's intensely mediated settings where we are constantly enjoined to respond, and when we demand this of each other, visual communicative short-cuts are godsends, useful adaptations to conditions in which detailed analyses and complex arguments are increasingly out of place.

Secondary visuality, or the primacy of the image in technologically mediated mass personal communication, is a key attribute of communicative capitalism. Rather than the privilege of top-down communication (broadcast media, advertising) or a means of expression confined to artists and professionals, visual communication is part of everyday communication in digital networks. With our phones and tablets, we converse via images as well as with words. Our phones are only tangentially for voice communication. On our screen appendages, images and words are tactilely identical. Most of the photos we will see today are digital images within a larger communicative flow.

In this setting of secondary visuality, images merge with text, become texts. Text is more than a caption and image is irreducible to illustration. Words and images are equivalent. One does not replace or subordinate the other. They intermix, mash, and mingle such that neither alone can be said to be the repository of truth. Because images circulate as conversations, we find ourselves engaging in a new communicative form where the originality or uniqueness of an image is less important than its common, generic qualities, the qualities that empower it to circulate quickly and easily, that make it contagious. Images function as visual colloquialisms, figures of speech, catch-phrases, and slang. Whereas the critical or philosophical discourse on photography may draw insight from analyses of specific images, secondary visuality subsumes the specific into the generic. What matters is whether an image is repeated, whether it incites imitation, whether it can jump from one context to another. An image's circulatory capacity, its power to repeat, multiply, and acquire a kind of force, has triumphed over its meaning (whether that meaning is withheld, inviting interpretation, or a seemingly straightforward and obvious representation of an object).

Under communicative capitalism, images circulate more easily than words and words take on features of images (as in word clouds and memes). This new visualism is not just a matter of advertising, television, brands, mainstream media, and the like. It characterizes one-to-one, one-to-few, one-to-many, few-to-many, many-to-few, and many-to-many

communication. Social media and texting rely on images of all sorts—emoji, photos, videos, memes—deploying them in multiple combinations. We live montage.

Jacques Lacan uses montage to explain the psychoanalytic concept of the drive.[5] Unlike instinct, which has a biological source, a specific object, and an aim that can be satisfied, drive links together disparate components in a repetitive circuit. The drive isn't satisfied. It consists of a repetitive intensity, one that can cut through or go against what Sigmund Freud and others have presented as natural instincts. For Lacan, drive as such is death drive, a persistence beyond what seems good, pleasurable, or balanced. Enjoyment accompanies persistence, repetition, circulation, not achievement or results. Instead of a big bang, there are little charges, just enough to keep us fascinated, to fasten us in.[6]

This psychoanalytic concept of drive helps illuminate the enjoyment that we derive from the repetitive circulatory practices of communicative capitalism. Conceived in terms of drive, networked communications circulate as multiple systems of repetition and capture, delivery systems well-suited to the peculiar and uncanny human propensity to become stuck on minor activities and minimal differences. We link and click. Having found one cool gif, we look for others, without looking for anything in particular. We scroll through our feeds—Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, Snapchat—taking pleasure in the smooth surface of the phone, the swiping gesture, the cat photos, the familiar faces. The flow of words and images don't tell stories and they don't make arguments. They rarely appear as separate objects. There's not one image. Instead, out of repetition emerge trends, bubbles, and aggregates, common images through which collectivity momentarily shines.

Collectivity and the Commonface

The digital habitats of secondary visuality encourage collectivization. The ostensibly odd or unique image becomes one among many: 49 weird family photos from the seventies; 23 worst celebrity plastic surgery disasters; 10 most beautiful sunsets; "39 Renaissance Babies Who Can't Even." Websites like Buzzfeed and other clickbait aggregators specialize in the collectivization of the weird, the rendering of what might have once been seen as singular as common. The singular image is isolated and alone. The images that register are the ones that share with others and that others share. Their force comes from being many. The greater the circulation,

the greater the force: we know that others have seen it and shared it (the number of retweets and shares is right in front of us). To be sure, the collectivization of the aggregators is a privatization, an accumulation and enclosure of images onto a platform that will attract viewers and sell ads. The privacy of unattractive photos of private people in their everyday lives in the private sphere is subsumed and replaced by the private ownership of corporate property.

The collectivization that accompanies secondary visuality, that renders images as elements of speech and that turns private moments into private property owned by another, extends to photographs of faces. In communicative capitalism, images of others are images of me. Each day, millions of tweets include text saying "this is me" or "then, I'm like" with an accompanying gif of someone who is not actually them. I convey who I am by sharing a photo of someone else. My identity or sense of self is not so singular or unique that it can only stand for itself, only represent itself. It's interchangeable with others. Their faces and expressions convey my own. Not only do I see myself in others, I present others as myself. The face that once suggested the identity of a singular person now flows in collective expression of common feelings. Reaction gifs work because of the affect they transmit as they move through our feeds, imitative moments in the larger heterogeneous being we experience and become.

Sharing, repeating, makes us part of a crowd. Pleasure accrues through repetition: the counts of retweets and likes let us know we are not alone; we see with others as they see with us. On Twitter, for instance, the fact of a retweet doesn't tell you where someone stands. A retweet itself may be either for or against, subversive or supportive, sincere or ironic. It might just be a "look at that!" A trending hashtag usually indexes a division, the struggle over and around a term. It marks a contagious intensity, something about which many people have strong feelings. Crowds, in squares and in media, are generally diverse and tumultuous. Imitation, repetition, contagion do not imply agreement.

Communicative capitalism's circulating images are images without viewers. It's not that images are unseen (although many go unshared, culled, deleted like so many thoughts unsaid). It's that they are not seen as separate, as unique. They flow into our life montage, becoming the visual common through which we converse, the archive or inchoate lexicon of our expression. Digital images don't present themselves as objects for scrutiny and analysis but for repetition and imitation. The less unique,

the better. We don't have time to look at them—just a quick glance and then we'll share and scroll down.

Under second visuality, faces are common and private, belonging to those other than their bearers. Circulating, they express the feelings of anyone. As private property, they are claimed by corporations. Just as verbal colloquialisms are expressed as "commonplaces" so are repetitive visuals "commonfaces." We should take this point to its logical extreme: selfies are a communist form of expression, social products appropriated by capitalism.

The critical reflex is to dismiss selfies as yet another indication of a pervasive culture of narcissism. I disagree. The narcissism critique approaches the selfie as if it were analyzing a single photograph. It views the person in that photograph as the photograph's subject. Selfies, though, should be understood as a common form emerging out of the communicative practices of secondary visuality. Understood from within these practices, the selfie has a collective subject, the many participating in the common practice, the many imitating each other. The figure in the photo is incidental.

A selfie is a photo one makes of oneself using a mobile phone in order to share the photo on social media. It exists digitally, in that weird digital in-between of instant and forever. It's not meant as a commemoration. It doesn't memorialize what we've done. It's a quick registration of what we're doing. On Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, selfies flow past, a kind of ongoing people's montage of *right now*. Multiple images of the same form, the selfie form, stream across our screens, a dispersed crowd like the people we pass walking along a sidewalk or in a mall. When we upload selfies, we are always vaguely aware that someone, when it is least opportune, may take an image out of its context and use it to our disadvantage. But we make them anyway as part of a larger social practice that says a selfie isn't really of me; it's not about me as the subject of a photograph. It's my imitation of others and our imitation of each other. To consider the selfie as a singular image removed from the larger practice of sharing selfies is like approaching a magazine through one word in one issue. A selfie is a photo of the selfie form, the repetition of a repeated practice.

To make the counter-intuitive idea of selfie communism convincing, I enlist Walter Benjamin. In his well-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin distinguishes between the cult value of a work of art and its exhibition value.[7] "Cult value" refers to

the role of works of art in rituals. Works appear in temples and cathedrals, helping to generate mystery or a sense of the divine. “Exhibition value” involves the liberation of a work from its ritual context. Instead of being valued because of its magical role in invoking the divine, a work is valued for artistic criteria. It is produced to function as art. Benjamin notes that the shift toward exhibition value involves an increase in the number of viewers of a work and an increase in a work’s transportability. Frescos in a cathedral or a stand of sacred icons may be viewed by only a few religious adepts or, at best, by the faithful who congregate at specifically designated times. In contrast, a painting or sculpture can be moved from one site to another, in principle becoming accessible to ever more people. With film, exhibition value—the increase in accessibility and transportability—increases even more. What was distant and unapproachable comes closer.

Photography, Benjamin says, best exemplifies the change in exhibition value. Selfies exemplify a further move, a move to circulation value. Accessibility and transportability don’t just increase, they become ends in themselves. That the camera is a phone tells us that images are for communicating. Reproduction becomes inseparable from production: the image posted on Facebook can be on any number of screens at the same time, whether or not it even registers to anyone scrolling through. I was surprised recently when I heard a museum curator discuss a large work of public art. His criteria for the success of the work was the number of photographs of it that appeared on Instagram. For the curator, the value of the work was its degree of circulation. This example isn’t about selfies, but it illustrates my point about circulation value.

Communicative capitalism subsumes communication into digital networks premised on access and immediacy. Almost any feeling, image, or thought can be shared with another, instantly added to the larger flow of feelings, images, and thoughts. Our sharing replaces one sort of privacy with another: on social media, private feelings become private property, belonging to the corporation who owns the platforms and traces of our social engagement. In a setting of ubiquitous media, where we are enjoined to participate, contribute, and share—and where we enjoy participating, contributing, and sharing—the means of literary and artistic production, reproduction, and distribution have converged. The technologies we use to communicate and create push our ideas and images into networks and onto screens where they are common yet owned by another.

Benjamin discusses photography as a technique of mechanical reproduction. Mechanical reproduction "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence."[8] Benjamin continues, it "detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition." The mechanically reproduced object (like a photograph or audio record) can be inserted into different contexts, associated with different objects, read from the perspective of varying discursive frameworks. As an object of a process of mechanical reproduction, a work escapes its original material condition of having been made to reappear in a new setting oriented to the viewer, listener, or spectator. It no longer has a unique existence in a particular time and space but a plural existence, a *common* existence, in that the appearance of the work is shared by this place and that place, this time and that time. In its multiple appearings, it is common to them.

When images are emancipated from their exhibition value, that is, when they are made to circulate, commonality of images becomes the general milieu. The context of communication is one of a generalized visuality characterized by multiplicity, repetition, and association. Again, we live montage. In this montage, patterns emerge when forms repeat. Brands are a commercial version of this repetition. Hashtags, emoji, memes, and selfies are the people's version, one way that we try to produce meanings in a setting where capitalism has privatized our basic social interactions and turned them into a storable, mineable resource.

Much interesting and influential commentary on Benjamin's discussion has focused on his concept of the "aura" and the extent to which the aura has decayed under conditions of mechanical reproduction. I am more interested in his account of these conditions in terms of the increased significance of "the masses." The masses, Benjamin explains, desire to bring things closer; they try to get hold of the object at close range via reproductions of it. The masses are inclined toward "overcoming the uniqueness of every reality."[9] This perception of the overcoming of uniqueness is marked by the "sense of the universal equality of things." The presence of the many in contemporary life changes how objects appear. Reproduced in popular media (Benjamin's examples are magazines and newsreels), objects become commensurable, like statistics. Any one is equal to any other.

Benjamin observes that even as photography exemplifies exhibition value, it has not been entirely cut off from cult value. Cult value became concentrated in the human face; "the portrait was the focal point of early photography."[10] When photography starts to feature images without

people, exhibition value trumps cult value. The photograph loses its aura of mystery and becomes a kind of evidence, an accompaniment to stories and texts. Photos are less singular objects or images to be contemplated than they are temporary and replaceable elements.

With the selfie, the face returns to the photo, now emancipated from exhibition value. A selfie is not a portrait. It's not an image of the unique and irreplaceable. It's an instance of how one is like many, equal to any other. The selfie demonstrates further the emancipation of the commonality of the object from the commodity form. To be common and reproducible is no longer strictly a characteristic of the commodity—especially in a context where commodities are inscribed with individuality (personalized sneakers, designer this and that). To be common and reproducible is a characteristic of each of us, a realization we enact with every selfie and hashtag, even when we may not be fully aware that we are doing it.

Benjamin notes that with the flourishing of print media—the proliferation of newspapers and journals, the prevalence of "letters to the editor"—readers become writers and literary license becomes common property. In communicative capitalism, viewers become photographers and models, actors and filmmakers; spectators become spectacles, and spectacles become instants, snapshots, nuggets of circulating feeling. Selfies are faces as common property, common property owned by the few.

Circulation, Not Toleration

With the secondary visuality of communicative capitalism, communicative utterances that might have once been speech acts—talking on the phone or sending a letter to the editor—now mix words and images: a text with emoji, an animated GIF inserted into a comment thread, a meme. Visual conversations are carried out through photos and short videos. As interactions that flow across our screens, multiple images envelop us in a montage of humor, horror, the mundane, and the bizarre. The repercussion of secondary visuality is that popular politics unfolds as the politics of the crowd.[11]

Networked media don't facilitate democratic deliberation. There's no time to consider every argument or viewpoint. Contemporary commentators thus fret about "bubbles," "cascade effects," "bandwagoning,"

and "confirmation bias." The classic crowd theorists of the early twentieth century considered similar phenomena with a different vocabulary: imitation, contagion, suggestion, de-individuation, and affective intensification. Even more: they said that the crowds think in images.

Typically, the elite chastises the crowd and all the processes associated with it—imitation and visuality are subordinated to originality and the word. As Jacques Rancière notes, the dominant logic "makes the visual the lot of multitudes and the verbal the privilege of the few."[12] Rancière rejects this logic, arguing that words actually are images, "that is to say, forms of redistribution of the elements of representation." Rancière makes this argument in the context of a discussion of the intolerable image. His concern is not with the circulation of digital images in social media. Rather he is questioning assumptions regarding the political capacity of images so that he might present politics aesthetically, as the opening to new arrangements of the sensible.

Although not his point, Rancière's observation points to the flattened terrain of networked participatory media, a communicative milieu of rapidly circulating reappropriations of words and images. In this milieu, an awkward facial expression can undermine a cogent argument. A silly caption can détourn a serious or straightforward photograph—and these effects are contingent on repetition and circulation. Creative juxtaposition has been set free from the domain of art to thrive in the digital networks of communicative capitalism. The most powerful word-image combinations reproduce rapidly, contagiously, as people copy and share them. The political content of these combinations is open. Different sides and interests use them in struggle and treat them as sites of struggle. As I already mentioned, trending hashtags generally point to battles, contestations over a meaning rather than its acceptance. If there wasn't a conflict, something at stake in the circulation of the image, why bother?

Rancière says that "the images of art do not supply weapons for battles."[13] His idea here is that the presumption of a "straight line" from the image of an intolerable situation, to an understanding of the reality of that situation, to a desire to act politically to change the situation is mistaken. This is not how the politics of visibility works, he argues. Artistic images suggest new configurations of the sensible and they do so "on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated." Less weapons than they are openings, artistic images hinge on the introduction of the unanticipated.

Rancière might be correct with respect to works of art shown in museums and galleries. When images are emancipated from their exhibition value, however, when they are made to circulate, their political operation is configured according to the dynamics of the crowd. Practices of image-sharing constitutive of secondary visuality suggest the limit to Rancière's account. Within these practices, images can be weapons. Moreover, their power can come from the mobilization of anticipation, the generic, and the common.

The communicative capacity of images—emojis, memes, reaction gifs—relies on a certain anticipation of effect. To circulate efficiently, an image shouldn't be viewed, that is, contemplated and interpreted. It has to be obvious, fast, with a little charge to incite people to deploy it. When someone uses "this is me" to caption an image of someone else, the intent is not to surprise a viewer or provoke a viewer into questions regarding the instability of personal identity. The point is quickly to register a feeling using a common visual language. In the politicized interactions raging throughout social media, images are lobbed as so many visual grenades, produced and circulated as means to expose, condemn, humiliate, and undermine. A common image (of a presidential candidate, say) is expropriated, text is attached to it, and the image-word combination is released into the fray, ready to be duplicated, altered, and circulated. Every forward, retweet, share, or like is another arrow in an endless epic orc battle.

At the same time, the archive of images and their traces stored in the corporate and state servers misleadingly presented as the cloud provides ammunition for a range of other battles—the knowledge of customers and their interconnections desired by advertisers, the knowledge of terrorists, insurgents, and whistle-blowers desired by the state. And in yet another twist, the expropriation and redistribution of images direct us to the contradictory conditions of class war under communicative capitalism: because it is so easily created and shared, digital content is hard to commodify even as it owned. Much of what is posted is offered up for free, and what isn't, people take, their taking itself driving the accumulation and appropriation of traces and metadata owned by another. Cultural producers have a hard time getting paid for their work even as the hold of the commodity form in the realm of affects, images, and ideas is diminished. In the words of technology theorist Jaron Lanier, "[o]rdinary people 'share,' while elite network presences generate unprecedented

fortunes."[14] In class war, everything is a weapon; part of the struggle consists in seizing and knowing how to use them.

The secondary visuality of communicative capitalism directs us to a visual milieu characterized by imitation, repetition, and circulation. In this setting, the power of images comes from the crowd, the many who give them their force. Political tactics adequate to this setting will find ways to seize and deploy the common in the service of a divisive egalitarian politics. Instead of repeating the individualist worry over being just another face in the crowd, they will champion the face as a crowd, recognizing the increasing force of collectivity and the common and the necessity of seizing for the many what is claimed by the few.

Notes

1. For a more thorough discussion of communicative capitalism, see Dean (2002) and Dean (2009).
2. Ong (1982).
3. For more detail, see Dean (2010).
4. Ong (1995).
5. See my discussion in Dean (2010).
6. See my discussion in Dean (2018).
7. Benjamin (1969).
8. Benjamin (1969, 221).
9. Benjamin (1969, 223).
10. Benjamin (1969, 226).
11. For more detail, see Dean (2016).
12. Ranciere (2009, 97).
13. Ranciere (2009, 103).
14. Jaron Lanier (2013, 15).

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Epilogue

The *Aesthetics and Politics of the Online Self* was written before the explosion of the great pandemic of 2020. It was conceived when nobody had experienced the consequent lockdowns, curfews, the development of "tier systems" or red-orange-yellow zones as geographical and mobility designations or, maybe more significantly, the concrete risk of contagion and all that it carries with it due to in person, physical gatherings. What is clear to us now, while still in the thick of the emergency (with not much of a short-term relief in view), is that a new perceptual regime of the reality of the body has followed the appearance of the COVID virus and the contagion it carries with it. While too early to fully take stock of the kind of havoc that this contagion event has wreaked on our sense of self and our subjectivity, it is clear that the centrality of representations and images that were at the core of so-called selfie culture were quickly replaced by a burst in the awareness of our physical vulnerabilities, offering a renewed perspective on the concreteness of face-to-face relationships along with the power and the risks of material shared presence.

If previously voiced common sense interpretations, according to which digital duplication and networked projections were bringing about a crisis and a demise of the organic and the bodily, of the contingency of human creatures and living beings in general, it is by now clear how, to the contrary, the virtual transformations of bodies in their digital counterparts needs to be rethought and reduced to a new awareness. The essays the precede also

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argued for complicating this one-dimensional understanding. The pandemic has simply made it more evident.

*How else to think of how b*odies took center stage in the Black Lives Matter movement and in the protests and upheavals that exploded onto the scene after the images of the brutal murder of George Floyd were shared online or news of Breanna Taylor's assassination circulated. The BLM slogan, "I can't breathe" underlined the needs of the bodies, their vulnerability and the unpredictability that surrounds their survival. Just as "Say her name" resounded with a need for embodied identification. The online circulation of these modern-day lynchings and the raw violence of the police created the necessity of the bodies in the streets. It was Judith Butler, after all, that in her performative theory of the assembly suggested that the precarity of bodies imposes their public performativity as their unique strength, the force of the gesture as more relevant than many utterances, many speeches.

So, the body is vulnerable and its weaknesses require attention. At the same time the Covid emergency made us realize that there is a difference between *real* presence and online presence. At schools, in universities, in conferences, at work, being in presence-remotely online is not the same as being co-present together in the same space. Of course, distance learning, or emergency learning, was a necessity in many contexts in Europe, the US and elsewhere but it showed the irremediable inaccessibility of formative relationships uniquely online, though the infrastructure of distance learning allowed to maintain a connection, when it was impossible to meet for the vigor of the contagion. The more the body was kept at a distance from other bodies the more we realized how much a physical presence was needed to maintain the social and psychical balance in our lives.

Another transformation produced by this chaotic situation was the end of the illusion that reality was not relevant anymore because only the imaginary and the representation was the unique relevant component of reality. The vulnerability of the organic body claimed a new centrality. Only negationists were ready to attribute value to the imaginary of the conspiracy theory. The right-wing supporters were not ready to acknowledge the reality of human vulnerability caused by the virus spillover. They pretend that the contagion was fake, and it was used only to impose the emergency biopolitics regulations to which we have been subjected. They were not ready to accept the contingency of the event, the diffusion of the virus seen as guided for that rationale of governmentality and control.

Another effect on selfie culture during this pandemic was the change of habits related to travel that had consequences on the possibility to post our selfies in different locations. What happens if we are not allowed to move except in the circumscribed spaces of our neighborhoods if not stuck inside our flat with the immobility blues, again? The repetitiveness of the pathways that we were entitled to go through imposed a new communication regime. The empty centers of the cities we live, the lack of live spectacles, concerts, theaters, cinemas, etc., all these limitations have adverse effects on the spectacularism of selfie images, and on self-representation itself. We cannot rely on the surrounding space for guaranteeing the viral force of the digital self-image. The flat was the normal setting of the new selfie culture, which created a completely new frame of representation.

Another consequence of the lockdown was the noteworthy increase in the use of online dating apps. It is difficult to find new partners in the real world, but the lockdown amplified a feeling of solitude, so the online dating was the new setting for the search for a partner. Virtual online acquaintances and real needs of the body are again intertwined in the new pandemic condition.

The psychic balance of our life is menaced by the requirements of protecting ourselves from the virus. Sociality at work, in leisure and pleasure activities, our *free* time, and the time of physical activity and schools are no longer assured. *Stay at home* orders might be a protection from contagion and hold the virus at bay, but they do not protect us from the risks of depression and the psychotic effects of isolation that lurk around the hallway corner.

As the plaformization of existence proceeds apace and it becomes clear that it can only intensify and accelerate the aftermath of the emergency will most likely have to live with its consequences at all levels—physical, material, psychic, and representational. Physical body and online activities are now connected in ways that explode their very significance and distinction, with results that are sometimes contradictory, but imply a reflection on what we have termed as selfie culture. The overwhelming shock and the spiraling of these contradictions will not impact the concrete spaces of the political economy but invest the political and the aesthetic. A new research project in order to understand the long-term changes that the contagion experience will produce in our online habits and attitudes, a new savage journey into the heart of the post-pandemic online self will surely be needed.

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