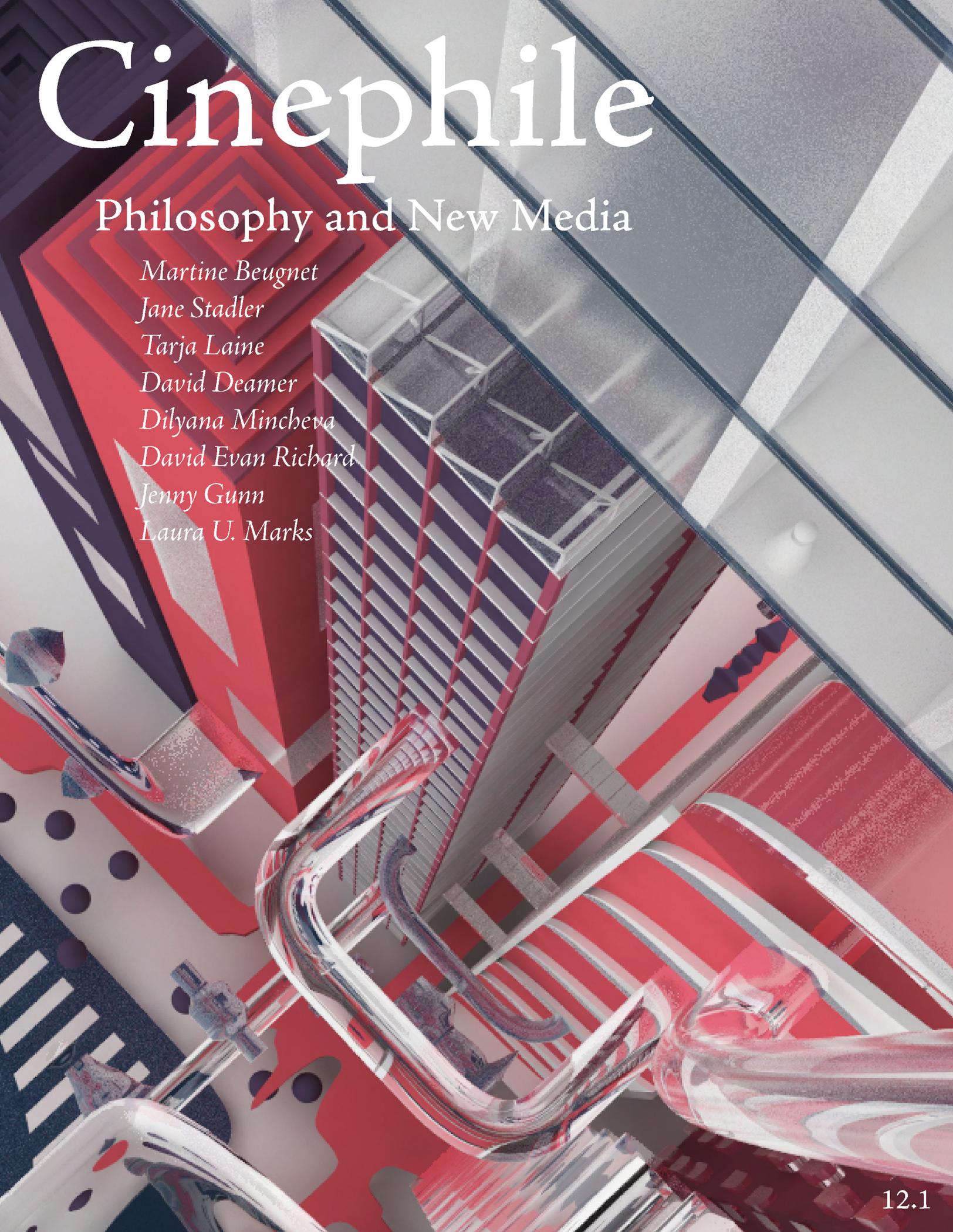


Cinephile

The background is a complex, abstract composition of geometric shapes and patterns. It features a prominent red and white diamond-shaped pattern on the left side, which appears to be a stylized film strip or a grid. The overall color palette is dominated by red, white, and grey, with some darker blue and black accents. The composition is dynamic and layered, suggesting a sense of depth and movement.

Philosophy and New Media

Martine Beugnet

Jane Stadler

Tarja Laine

David Deamer

Dilyana Mincheva

David Evan Richard

Jenny Gunn

Laura U. Marks



We are delighted to announce that the Department of Theatre and Film will be offering a Ph.D. in Cinema and Media Studies in 2019. The Ph.D. program will begin to accept students for the 2019/2020 academic year and the application deadline date will be December 1st, 2018. Please contact Dr. Lisa Coulthard at lisa.coulthard@ubc.ca for more information.



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Editors-in-Chief

Morgan Harper and Zoë Laks

Design

Morgan Harper and Zoë Laks

Artwork

Nicole Tischler

Faculty Advisor

Christine Evans

Program Administrator

Cameron Cronin

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UBC Film Program

Department of Theatre and Film
6354 Crescent Road
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V6T 1Z2

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Contributors

Martine Beugnet is Professor in Visual Studies at the University of Paris-Diderot. Her latest books include *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (EUP, 2007, 2012), *L'Attrait du flou*, on the history and aesthetics of blue in film, and the volume of collected essays co-edited with Allan Cameron and Arild Fetveit, *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the attractions of uncertainty*, both published in 2017. She recently joined NECSUS' editorial board. With Kriss Ravetto she also co-directs EUP's book series Studies in Film and Intermediality.

David Deamer is a writer and free scholar associated with Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. His interests lie at the intersection of cinema and culture with theory, history and politics, centring on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Friedrich Nietzsche. He is the author of *Deleuze's Cinema Books: Three Introductions to the Taxonomy of Images* (EUP, 2016); and *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema and the Atom Bomb: The Spectre of Impossibility* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He was co-founder of the now defunct online journal *A/V*; and currently serves on the British Society for Phenomenology executive committee. He also blogs online from time to time at daviddeamer.com.

Jenny Gunn is a PhD Candidate in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University. Jenny's research interests focus on critical media theory, feminist media studies, and continental philosophy. Her dissertation analyzes narcissism as an aesthetic form in the era of the selfie. Jenny is Editorial and Social Media Staff of *liquid blackness*, a research project on blackness and aesthetics.

Tarja Laine is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of Amsterdam and Adjunct Professor at the University of Turku, Finland. She is the author of *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky* (2015), *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies* (2011), and *Shame and Desire: Emotion, Intersubjectivity, Cinema* (2007). Her research interests include cinematic emotions, film aesthetics, and film-phenomenology. She is currently working on her final project at the Wackers Academy of fine arts in Amsterdam.

Laura U. Marks works on media art and philosophy with an intercultural focus. Her most recent books are *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (MIT, 2015) and *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (MIT, 2010). Marks programs experimental media art for venues around the world. She is Grant State Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

Dilyana Mincheva is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University. Her most recent research is engaged with the culturological study of religious iconoclasm, the politics of image in cinematic terrorism and utopia. She is the bearer of two international awards for research excellence (2012 and 2015) granted by the *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* and the author of the monograph *The Politics of Western Muslim Intellectual Discourse in the West: The Emergence of a Western-Islamic Public Sphere* (Sussex Academic Press, 2016).

David Evan Richard was recently awarded his PhD by the University of Queensland, writing a dissertation on film phenomenology and adaptation. His research has been published in *Adaptation* and *Senses of Cinema*.

Jane Stadler is Professor of Film and Media Studies in the Department of Media and Communication at Swinburne University, Australia. She led a collaborative Australian Research Council research project on landscape and location in Australian narratives (2011-2014) and has co-authored a book on this topic (*Imagined Landscapes* 2016), and she is the author of *Pulling Focus* (2008), co-author of *Screen Media* (2009) and *Media and Society* (2016), and co-editor of an adaptation studies anthology, *Pockets of Change* (2011). Her research interests include media geography and visceral cinema as well as phenomenological and philosophical approaches to screen aesthetics, ethics, and spectatorship.



Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

With the proliferation of digital platforms like Instagram, Netflix, and YouTube, we are faced with the question of whether we have entered an age of truly “new” media. In grappling with media’s shifting place in the digital era, *Cinephile* 12.1 combines philosophical and new media discourses to set classical and contemporary thought in dialogue. Throughout this issue, new media texts and platforms are deconstructed and, perhaps unsurprisingly, consensus on the impact, definition, and novelty of this phenomenon remains productively unresolved.

To investigate this nebulous topic, *Cinephile* 12.1’s authors employ a diverse set of philosophical methodologies—from process philosophy to object-oriented philosophy—to examine various media artifacts. This issue proposes an eclectic variety of approaches to media texts and platforms as it strives toward expanding philosophical deliberation in the digital era, with authors tackling foundational topics that include temporality, power, and truth. These discussions are all situated in the context of the vast changes to the forms and distribution methods of media platforms, and, as such, each article proposes both new questions and conclusions regarding our continually evolving relationship with media.

Cinephile 12.1 begins with a preface from Martine Beugnet, in which she explores the centrality of a crisis in temporality to contemporary scholarship on philosophy and new media. Next, using *Stalker* (Tarkovsky 1979) and its video game adaptations as case studies, Jane Stadler argues that sound works as a constitutive element in forming imagination. Following this, Tarja Laine’s Foucauldian interrogation of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy explores the manner in which visual technologies exert control over citizens while also functioning as subversive tools for counter-politics. In his article, David Deamer analyzes Adam Curtis’s *Hypernormalisation* (2016) to complicate the relationship between new media and truth by drawing from Nietzsche’s conclusions regarding truth’s reliance on fiction. Dilyana Mincheva’s article considers *Sense8*’s illustration of experimental utopias, arguing that the series confronts viewers with the Real through intimacy with the impos-

sible. David Evan Richard uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language to conclude that *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016) self-reflexively highlights film’s sensuality and reminds us that film language (deployed in various forms) requires a “fleshly dialogue” with the screen. In this issue’s final article, Jenny Gunn investigates the relationship between narcissism and the selfie through object-oriented philosophy. Our interview with Laura U. Marks concludes *Cinephile* 12.1; this dialogue touches on process philosophy’s relevance to media scholarship, new media’s materiality, and the importance of unfolding European philosophy’s non-Western roots, among other topics.

For their support and efforts in helping this issue become a reality, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the staff and faculty of the University of British Columbia’s Department of Theatre and Film who provided their advice and support throughout the editorial process. We would like to especially thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Christine Evans, for guiding us through our tenure as *Cinephile*’s Editors-in-Chief, as well as our incredible editorial board for the expertise and diligence. To each of this issue’s contributors, we are deeply grateful for the insight, thoughtfulness, and eloquence that each of you brought to your articles. Due to your unique voices, this issue has formed into a diverse, intricate, and, at times, wonderfully contradictory meditation on the philosophies and media of today’s world, and for that, we could not be more appreciative.

As you wend your way through the paths that follow, we hope that you will take note of how these investigations into new media require a bi-directional historical perspective. In this sense, *Cinephile* 12.1’s connecting thread posits new media as contingent upon countless historical developments, ultimately suggesting that new media may be understood neither as representing a teleological apex nor a sudden break from history. Instead, new media occupies a liminal position between global culture’s past and future.

Sincerely,

Morgan Harper and Zoë Laks

Co-Editors-in-Chief, 2017-2018

CINEPHILE

Preface

In an oft-quoted passage from *The Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust's narrator recounts an extraordinary moment he experienced during an otherwise monotonous train journey.¹ Waking up just before sunrise, the traveller's gaze is no sooner caught by the striking spectacle of the sky at dawn than the train's trajectory swerves and he suddenly finds himself facing a nocturnal, moonlit countryside. The narrator thus recalls spending the remainder of the journey going from one window to another, from darkness to light, trying to reconnect the fragments into "a complete view and a continuous picture" (15-16). In his illuminating commentary of this episode, Élie During points to the cinematic quality of Proust's description: the narrator's efforts evoke a form of filmic montage as he tries to recreate the landscape into a comprehensive image from the speeding train's windows (152).

Together with film, train travel remains one of modernity's foremost symbols and allegories for the shift in experience from human-centred to machine-mediated perception. Yet Proust's text also reads like an anticipation of the spectator's condition in the digital age. Faced with the visual field's complexification and fragmentation, brought about by technologies that both enhance and supersede her senses, the contemporary user-spectator must learn to surf the perceptual overload afforded by fast-evolving recording, communication, and display systems, while accepting the sense of lack constitutive of these systems. Paradoxically, technologically augmented perception and access, insofar as they surpass our capacity to process the available sensory data while making us aware of its tantalizing, virtual existence, generate the kind of fault-line that artists and writers have always exploited creatively. As Jane Stadler's article reminds us, the value of incompleteness should not be understated: in an experience of partial perception, brought about by excess or scarceness, the consciousness of absence or

lack fosters our imagination.² In Proust's account of the train journey, it is the failure of the narrator's body to suture vision's disjointed field that, in turn, allows the writer to deploy his distinctive style and skill at weaving together "heterogeneous, dislocated, apparently incomposable realities" (During 152). Hence, if our experience of the world is increasingly machine-mediated, imagination and creativity nonetheless remain indelibly tied to a process of embodied perception that relies on synesthetic connections.

Accordingly, in Mark Hansen's 2004 volume *New Philosophy for New Media*, the reassessment of digitization's effect on the production and reception of images (that which belongs to the perceptible realm) hinges on human embodied experience. Hansen rejects the notion that the advent of the digital is equatable with increasingly passive reception, or that a "pure flow of data unencumbered by any need to differentiate into concrete media types" should do away with "the now still crucial moment of perception" (1). Instead, he argues that since the digitized image itself is a process rather than a given, it involves an active engagement on the part of the viewer – an engagement that takes the form of affective-embodied interactivity. Consequently, whereas the digital is usually associated with intensified dematerialization, Hansen's Bergsonian approach centres on the body's functioning "as a kind of filter that selects, from among the universe of images circulating around it and according to its own embodied capacities, precisely those that are relevant

Hence, if our experience of the world is increasingly machine-mediated, imagination and creativity nonetheless remain indelibly tied to a process of embodied perception that relies on synesthetic connections.

1. This preface is based on an *Imaginaires Contemporains* seminar discussion (University of Paris 7). My thanks to Catherine Bernard and to Michel Imbert for their precious suggestions.

2. See the edited collections, *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination: The Image between the Visible and the Invisible* and *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*.

to it” (2). “Rather than selecting pre-existent images,” he adds, “the body now operates by filtering information directly and, through this process, creating images” (10).

However, Hansen’s positive account of a user-spectator’s participation in the selected images’ actualization from an endless pool of virtual data does not take into account the existence of other pre-emptive filtering processes. In her own take on Bergson, Laura Marks points to the complexification of the digital and the enfolding/unfolding processes at work in those images’ actualization from an infinite universe of virtual images. “We may consider the infinite to be constituted of innumerable folds . . . Every perception is an unfolding. To figure out where an image comes from, we need to find out how it arose from the infinite” (“Information” Marks 87).³ In our networked age of electronic information, digitization can function as a supplementary filter which Marks designates as a plane of information. Consequently, the code is a part of the “enfolding” that will need to be unfolded.

Power can arise from establishing a sense of immediacy and erasing the processes that enfold an image, leading end users to remain unaware of the filters that rule over the images we access. Whereas a strong anchorage in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology accounts for much of the continuing investment in exploring knowledge’s embodied forms, in line with Marks’s enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, contemporary approaches to new media remain equally preoccupied with the strategies of control at work in effacing images’ sources and modes of production.⁴ As David Deamer, Dilyana Mincheva, and David Richard point out in their articles, digital technology strives to make itself invisible, to achieve a state of immediacy where spectators experience representation and communication as seamless and unmediated. One key product of such continuity is surveillance in which the body is both the receptor and object of a system of vision that feeds on itself (Tarja Laine). Insofar as it eschews historical time, the withdrawal into objecthood as a self-sufficient, integral form of existence can only offer limited relief (Jenny Gunn). At the other end of the spectrum is the utopian notion of the osmotic collective, with “the phantasy of instant, pure, unnoisy communication” as the condition for the building of new forms of communities; framed by the very struc-

3. See also Marks’s “A Noisy Brush with the Infinite: Noise in Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics.”

4. In the texts comprised in this issue, as in Mark Hansen’s writing, “image” is not understood in the sense of a visual representation but in its broad sense, as that which we perceive. See Marks, “Unfolding-Enfolding Aesthetics” (102).

Power can arise from establishing a sense of immediacy and erasing the processes that enfold an image, leading end users to remain unaware of the filters that rule over the images we access.

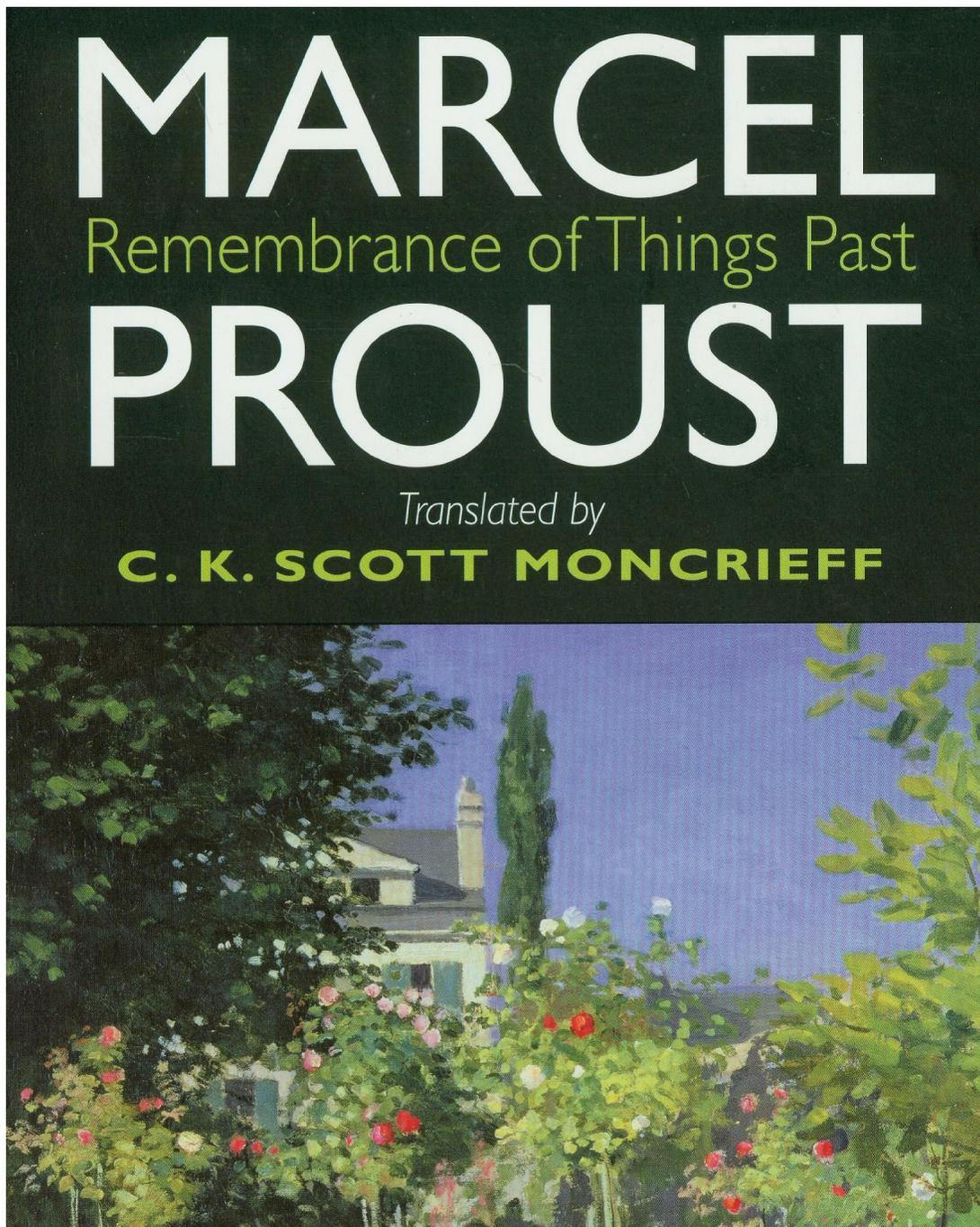
ture it seeks to challenge, this collective carries its own promise of segregation and reclamation (Mincheva). In this context, for artists and hackers alike, the import of breaking the flow is at the core of the ethics of their practice—not merely as a revival of modernist strategies of subversion, but, rather, in the vein of the Nietzschean “powers of the false,” as the disclosure of the co-existence of a multiplicity of incompatible discourses that are always also part of the system they may be denouncing (Deamer).

As this issue of *Cinephile* demonstrates, while process philosophy and phenomenology still dominate the field, the current scholarship in philosophy and new media is attentive to the crisis in political agency precipitated by digital modes of communication and labour organization that conform with the apparently inescapable logic of global capitalism. In this context, examples of critical, self-reflexive discourses and counter-technologies appear to arise not only from the high-end art to which independent and auteur cinema belong, but from the products of mainstream culture. In the resulting mix of media and genres (along with their concomitant heterochronies), the question of co-existing temporalities (time as historical, mechanical, or duration) that occupied the thinkers of the twentieth century, from Proust and Bergson to Deleuze and Foucault, meets the current interrogations of the contemporary “economy of attention.”⁵ For the crisis at hand is not only one of individualism and narcissism versus collective needs and agency, but one of time: in its endeavour to erase the traces of mediation and reach a perfect state of seamless, continuous presence, dominant modes of media communication and consumption do not merely undermine the possibility for critical distance. In the relentless foregrounding of immediate, ubiquitous access, they work to destroy our sense of time as duration, and, with it, the capacity, so fundamental to all political projects, to imagine ourselves as a part of a long *durée*.

5. See, among others: Jonathan Beller’s *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, and Yves Citton’s *Pour une écologie de l’attention*.

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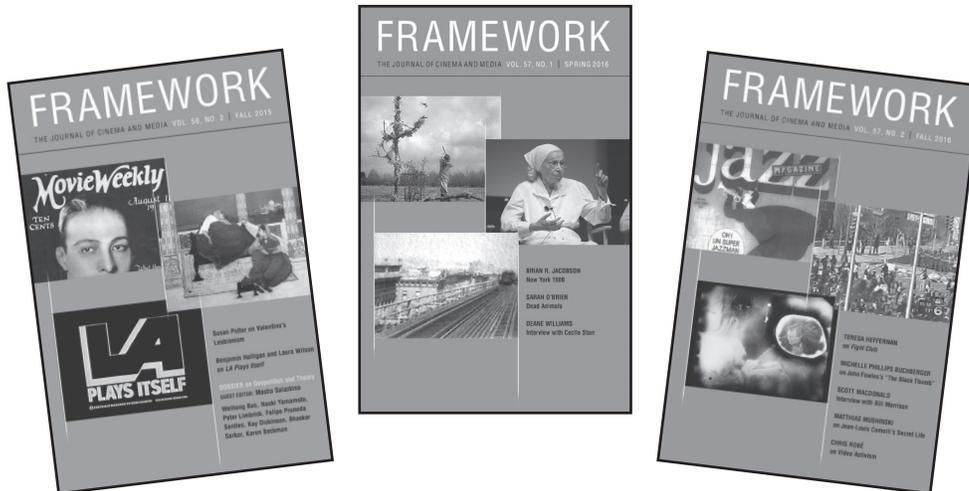
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Cinesonic Imagination: The Somatic, the Sonorous, and the Synaesthetic

“Starving the eye will inevitably bring the ear, and therefore the imagination, more into play,” according to acclaimed sound designer Randy Thom. This insight captures a central tenet of this article—the way imagination feasts on absence—and it prompts reflection on whether the imagination synaesthetically translates one sensory modality into another when a sense is “starved,” or when what is visibly present misaligns with what the ear apprehends. Imagination is central to the design and reception of cinematic soundscapes. In addition to audible properties, sound has tactile¹ and intangible qualities that raise further questions: is the cinematic imagination best understood as a cognitive process involving image formation, or does it include embodied, affective dimensions?

While one might expect imagination to provide a natural meeting point for screen studies and philosophy, given that the term itself suggests the fertile union of images and ideas central to both disciplines, Julian Hanich is one of the few philosophers of film to have systematically worked through various facets of the cinematic imagination.² In “Omission, Suggestion, Completion: Film and the Imagination of the

Spectator,” Hanich deftly classifies different forms of ellipsis and imaginative synthesis and details the ways in which sensory perception and imagination interrelate phenomenologically and aesthetically in cinematic experience. While aesthetic philosophers such as Roger Scruton acknowledge that imagination can have a moral character because it plays a role in understanding art and educating the emotions, there is a longstanding suspicion of the relationship between cinema and imagination (41–43). For instance, Scruton claims that spectatorship involves little imaginative effort or reward because, rather than evoking “the thing that is not there,” film realizes its subject for the audience with the presentation of a simulacrum (41). Unconvincingly, Scruton suggests that cinema’s sensory and emotional gratifications prevent imagination from doing its work.³

With Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker* as its case study, this article explores misconceptions about the relationship between imagery and imagination. Focusing on the relatively neglected territory of cinematic soundscapes, I canvas approaches to imagination in cognitive film theory and phenomenology in order to investigate sound design and film spectatorship in relation to philosophical accounts of imagination. In doing so, I aim to counterbalance the tendency to privilege visual images and cognition by considering overlooked aspects of imaginative experience that *Stalker* exemplifies and that screen media elicit, such as affect and synaesthesia. I conclude by considering the implications of technological advances in game-

and Szczepanik’s discussion of the synaesthetic qualities of silent cinema in “Sonic Imagination.”

3. Similarly, as Hanich points out, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggest cinema is guilty of “repressing the powers of imagination” because sound film, as an exemplar of consumer culture, is so closely identified with the reality it purports to represent that it *inhibits* imaginative exploration (Horkheimer and Adorno 99–100).

1. Regarding tactile, haptic, and inaudible sounds see Coulthard, “Haptic Aurality”; Kerins, *Beyond Dolby* (29, 36); and Stadler, “Experiential Realism” (453–54).

2. See also Evans’s work on mental imagery and sense perception in “Imagination and the Senses”; Lefebvre’s theory regarding the formation of mental images in “On Memory and Imagination in the Cinema”; McIver Lopes’s analysis of cinematic representation and experience in “Imagination, Illusion and Experience in Film”; Pettersson’s contribution to philosophical aesthetics in “Seeing What Is Not There: Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-localization”; Murray Smith’s influential work on self-focused personal or central imagining and impersonal or acentral imagining in *Engaging Characters* and more recently in *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*; my own chapter, “Imagination: Inner Sight and Silent Voices”; Stock’s examination of the kind of imagining and supposition that is called for by fictional narratives in *Only Imagine*;

[...] *I aim to counterbalance the tendency to privilege visual images and cognition by considering overlooked aspects of imaginative experience that Stalker exemplifies and that screen media elicit, such as affect and synaesthesia.*

play and virtual reality for understanding embodied, imaginative engagement with new media.

Although a thorough exploration of the imaginative horizons of technological change lies beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that *Stalker* has had several sound mixes, its image has been remastered, and its title has been adapted into interactive computer games. *Stalker's* original Mosfilm soundtrack was monophonic, yet as technology has advanced, different sound mixes have been released, including Fox Lorber's 1998 VHS mix, RusCiCo's 2002 5.1 DVD surround track with added music and sound effects, and Criterion Collection's 2017 Blu-ray that offers a 2K digital restoration of the original 35mm film negative along with the original Russian 1.0 LPCM Mono soundscape. While acknowledging that each version occasions imaginative variances and that contemporary cinema technologies, such as Dolby Atmos and low-frequency effects, may produce enhanced spatial and sensory immersion that could augment embodied imaginative experience, this article focuses on the original 1979 version.

Stalker takes the audience away from the monochrome reality of domestic life into a dangerous, restricted area where time and space are distorted, following a hired guide known as Stalker and his clients, a writer and a professor, as they seek to enter a room in the Zone where wishes are granted.⁴ In his book *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky articulates interest in "the interior world of the individual imagination" and how it is "possible to reproduce what a person sees within himself, all his dreams, both sleeping and waking" (71). *Stalker's* evocative soundscape exposes interiority and brings oneiric, ineffable elements to the screen and in this film Tarkovsky achieves far more than a reproduction of "what a person sees within

4. For scholarly criticism of Tarkovsky's films, see Smith's "The Edge of Perception: Sound in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*"; Dunne's edited collection, *Tarkovsky*, with chapters on Russia, religion, and literary, philosophical, and artistic influences; and Johnson and Petrie's *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*.

himself," even if we take sight to be associated with knowledge and reproduction to involve more artistry than mimesis.

Imagination's relation to the production of imagery (seeing with the mind's eye) is founded in philosophical accounts that frame imagination in terms of images that mediate between objects and ideas. One aspect of imagination—*mimesis*—relates to imitation and forging illusions, while the other—*phantasia*—refers to perceiving or being deceived by fantastical images. This view of imagination is hardly favourable, given Plato's allegory of humans imprisoned in a cave of illusions like spectators in a cinema, captivated by a shadow play of images and unable to perceive the real forms on which these representations are based.⁵ This link between imagination, images, and deception carries through René Descartes's suspicions of the evil demon manipulating appearances and more recent perspectives on visual media by Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean Baudrillard, and Gregory Currie in their work on simulation, spectatorship, and the illusory power of images.⁶



The image's lack of truth status has led Kendall Walton to suggest that we "make believe" that cinematic events and characters are real because "imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true. What is true is to be believed; what is fictional is to be

5. See Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in Chapter XXV (vii. 541a-521b) of *The Republic*.

6. See Baudrillard's *The Evil Demon of Images*; Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus"; Currie's *Image and Mind*; and Descartes's "First Meditation."

imagined” (41). Currie argues that we imagine screen events occur without needing to attribute reality status to them because we run our actual beliefs “off-line” and experience imaginative activity that simulates belief (148). In response, Derek Matravers asks, “if we believe the event took place within a fiction,” then “why do we need to imagine it as well?” (195).⁷ Matravers advocates avoiding the term imagination altogether in accounts of film spectatorship, claiming that distinct mental states are not needed to respond to perceptions versus representations. I contend that the focus on belief in these accounts is misplaced and that sensory perception of representations and images often involves imaginative activity.

Imagination’s mediating role between perception, representation, and ideas has preoccupied many thinkers, from Immanuel Kant’s categories of productive, reproductive, and transcendental imagination⁸ to Edward Casey’s work on the phenomenology of imagination.⁹ These theorists detail imagination’s relationship to perceptions of the material world, ranging from the invocation of objects that are not present to the senses to the construction of non-existent possibilities. However, evaluating imagination in relation to the “real” has led to imagination being considered a lower form of cognition than reason. Cognitive film theorist Berys Gaut contends, “a better account of imagination would hold that to imagine something is to entertain it, without asserting it. That is, the imaginer is not committed to the truth of the representational content concerned” (333). For Gaut, the difference lies in “the kind of mental act directed at the representational content” (333). With respect to *Stalker*, Gaut may agree that without *believing* in the existence of a forbidden zone in which time and space do not obey the laws of physics and flowers have no scent, we can still entertain the *conceivability* of such a zone being created by an apocalyptic event. Yet Gaut’s account of imagination, like Walton’s and Cur-

rie’s, remains focused on mental acts and the relationship between what is represented and what is real.

This overview highlights two things that have thus far been neglected in accounts of the cinematic imagination: sound has been ignored by comparison with image, and cognitive acts like hypothesizing have been privileged over the affective and multisensory dimensions of imagination. Imaginative experience is not reducible to mental acts or the formation of mental images; the imagination extends insight and perceptiveness beyond appearances into the realm of affect and ideas and, as Hanich points out, cognitive film studies has yet to explore the experience of “*sensual completion*, the acts of imagining the absent.” Hence, I turn to a phenomenological perspective on sound and imaginative experience to address this gap.



Absence is one of imagination’s invariant features—it is a quality that Jean-Paul Sartre focuses on in his account of nothingness¹⁰ and that Don Ihde writes of in *A Phenomenology of Sound* when he says, “it is to the invisible that listening may attend” (14). As phenomenologist Erez Nir claims, “in imagination the object is present in a *marginal* way and what is directly experienced is the object’s *affective form*, which is an intuitive aspect of the object’s value qualities” (52).¹¹ Consequently, Nir sees imagination as “a presence of experience and an absence of an object” (56), which leads to “*the peculiar ability to have an affective experience of something without its presence*” (57). How, then, does this haunting absence or attentional invocation of presence relate to affective experience in

7. See also Matravers’s chapter on fiction and the imagination in his monograph *Fiction and Narrative* where he expresses skepticism as to how perceiving images might exercise the imagination when watching films: “Why should the imagination be thought constitutive of a visual experience of a representation? The point is pithily stated by Richard Wollheim, who, again, contrasts the two notions, claiming that ‘imagination has no necessary part to play in the perception of what is represented’ ... [D]epictive representations do not involve the imagination simply in virtue of being depictive representations” (148-49).

8. Kant theorises various functions of imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he distinguishes between images and concepts and discusses imagination’s role in synthesising the two (104-05), and in the *Critique of Judgment*, where he examines imagination’s sensory aspects and its generative, productive qualities (94, 182, 243, 314).

9. See Casey’s *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*.

10. See Sartre’s *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* and McGinn’s *Mindsight* (29).

11. Nir rightly critiques accounts of imagination that focus on the truth status “of the imaginative object at the expense of the imaginative experience as a whole” (52).

the acoustic imagination, and what might we learn from *Stalker*?

In *Audio-Vision*, composer and sound theorist Michel Chion discusses the cinesonic imagination, stating: “the question of listening with the ear is inseparable from that of listening with the mind, just as looking is with seeing” (33). This suggests that perception and cognition are entwined, and that we may characterize listening with the mind’s ear and seeing with the mind’s eye as imaginative experiences that extend beyond narrative comprehension, optical viscosity, and causal listening into the realm of hapticity, emotion, and mood or atmosphere. Tarkovsky claims:

In itself, accurately recorded sound adds nothing to the image system of cinema, for it still has no aesthetic content. As soon as the sounds of the visible world are removed from it, or that world is filled, for the sake of the image, with extraneous sounds that don’t exist literally, or if the real sounds are distorted so that they no longer correspond with the image—then the film acquires a resonance. (162)

The correspondence of sound with image to which Tarkovsky refers is precisely what phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack interrogates in “When the Ear Dreams.” For Sobchack, the sonic imagination relates to the imaginative qualities of cinematic sound design and is expressed in moments when “sound originates, dominates, and shapes the image, rather than the image dominating and grounding (or anchoring) the sound” (4). Sobchack engages with Chion’s concepts of “acousmatic sound” (Chion 32), which is sound divorced from its visible source, and the practice of “reduced listening,” which “focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning” (Chion 29). Reduced listening could also be termed phenomenological listening; similar to the process of phenomenological reduction, reduced listening disrupts established preconceptions as we attend to the inherent qualities of sound. Chion claims that reduced listening reveals how “the emotional, physical, and aesthetic value of a sound is linked not

It is a film that uses exquisite cinematography and artfully composed sound and music as well as elemental aspects such as water to evoke an imaginative, multisensory engagement with Stalker’s subjectivity and with the Zone itself.



only to the causal explanation we attribute to it but also to its own qualities of timbre and texture, to its own personal vibration” (31).

In his foreword to *Audio-Vision*, Walter Murch suggests that the “sensory incompleteness” arising when sound and image are not realistically fused “engages the imagination of the viewer” through “the metaphoric use of sound” and that “by choosing carefully what to eliminate, and then reassociating different sounds that seem at first hearing to be somewhat at odds with the accompanying image, the filmmaker can open up a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush” (xx). Filling the “perceptual vacuum” of “sensory incompleteness” is central to the cinematic imagination. The process by which designers render sounds and audiences interpret them boils down to “translating one order of sensation into another” (Chion 112). When Chion speaks of “‘transliterating’ tactile sensations into auditory sensations,” he is effectively describing cinematic synaesthesia (112). According to Jennifer Barker, synesthesia “is a phenomenon in which a stimulus in one sense modality triggers automatically additional sensory response(s) in a different sense modality” (378). Indeed, when Barker states that “film draws our attention, consciously or otherwise, to something that is both within us and beyond us, both elemental and deeply strange. In other words, synesthesia haunts us from the inside” (375), she could well be describing *Stalker*. It is a film that uses exquisite cinematography and artfully composed sound and music as well as elemental aspects such as water to evoke an imaginative,

multisensory engagement with Stalker's subjectivity and with the Zone itself.

For instance, when Stalker beckons to his weary companions and they speculate that his tone suggests he will start sermonizing, they are resting in a place that seems damp and cold. The sound of running water gives way to aqueous droplets falling into a pool, although no water is visible; suddenly the sonorous splash of something heavy plunging into deep water forms a sound bridge that Sobchack might say "originates, dominates and shapes" the next image. The camera peers down into a dark well and the sound waves of the object dropped into the well are translated into the realm of the visible as rippling, wavering, abstract imagery of light on water, soon accompanied by limpid music and Stalker's disembodied voice. Here acousmatic sound conveys the characters' experiences of touch, temperature, weight, and depth as well as giving access to the voice of Stalker's mind. Sound's rhythmic and tactile qualities elicit the audience's embodied imagination, creating emotive emplacement in the story world. As sound designer Mark Ward argues, "the crafting of a sonic element is focused upon the task of designing affect at both the sensory and narrative levels" (163). Where the sensory and narrative aspects intersect, the affective qualities of the sonic imagination are most illuminating in *Stalker* as sound insidiously manipulates affective responses:

On one hand, sound works on us directly, physiologically (breathing noises in a film can directly affect our own respiration). On the other, sound has an influence on perception ... it interprets the meaning of the image, and makes us see in the image what we would not otherwise see, or would see differently. (Chion 34)

In *Stalker*, this becomes evident in relation to rhythmic sounds dissociated from images during the rail journey into the Zone.

In the rail scene, the diegetic mechanical noise of the draisine clattering rhythmically on the tracks gradually transforms into synthesized music as the protagonists move from monochrome reality toward the verdant but lethal Zone. Music and sound conjoin to express

Arguably, it is this encounter with the inhuman and the unknown that enlivens the sonic imagination through the use of off-screen and non-diegetic sound.

something increasingly inhuman and unknown, but this is not the case in the adulterated 5.1 remix, where the whole sequence is overdubbed with obtrusive music. It is the subtle elision of distinctions between ambient, organic environmental sounds, mechanical sound effects, and Eduard Artemyev's entrancing underscore that draws into question the nature of the diegetic space that the characters and the audience are entering in the original film. When the railcar stops at the threshold of the Zone, Stalker calls it "the quietest place in the world." As he falls silent, the low static hiss of the original monaural soundtrack gives a sense that the Zone is alive with the crackle of electricity (though this uncanny effect has been expunged from the digitally remastered Blu-ray release). Arguably, it is this encounter with the inhuman and the unknown that enlivens the sonic imagination through the use of off-screen and non-diegetic sound. As the travelers remark on their discomfort in this strange place, the sound of running water leaks into the soundtrack and an unearthly, reverberant howl emanates from deep in the Zone, offering sonic realization of the protagonists' fears about the dangerous space they are about to enter and communicating apprehensiveness to the audience. As Ward claims, "cinema recruits our body's innate capacity for 'feeling into' another's affective state" and "cinematic sound design is an embodied process of experiential knowing" (185-86). The distant howl, the trickle of unseen water, and abstracted sounds of the railcar are unmoored from images on screen. These inexplicable sounds do not produce narrative comprehension, but offer a form of knowledge through the senses and through the evocation of affect, mood, and what Tarkovsky refers to as "emotional tone" (158). Tarkovsky explains crafting emotional tone and atmosphere thus:

Everything will begin to reverberate in response to the dominant note: things, landscape, actors' intonation ... One thing will be echoed by another ... and an atmosphere will come into being ... in *Stalker*, ... the atmosphere that came to exist as a result was more active and emotionally compelling than that of any of the films I had made previously. (194)

The prevalence of sonic metaphors in Tarkovsky's description of atmosphere is noteworthy here, with reverberation, intonation, dominant notes, and echoes intermingling with elements of *mise-en-scène*, such as setting and performance. Similarly, in his article about cinematic moods, film-philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink notes that cinema historian Lotte Eisner "frequently used the term *Stimmung* (meaning

mood, attunement or atmosphere)” in her work; for Eisner, *Stimmung* “evokes a ‘musical condition of the soul’, encompassing both ‘psychical acoustics and the harmony of vibrations’” (Sinnerbrink 149).

In 2012, three articles about cinematic mood were published: the aforementioned piece by Sinnerbrink as well as work by Carl Plantinga and John Rhym. These articles brought scholarly attention to the significance of affect and atmosphere in film. All three scholars note that mood is more pervasive, diffuse, and encompassing than focused emotional states and less directly tied to cognition, action, or causation. According to Plantinga, most people “think of the mood of a narrative as its atmosphere, but it is also common to describe the mood of a work as the complex of emotions it seems to express or embody” (456). Plantinga distinguishes the artistic tone and affective character of films from moods that films evoke in spectators (465). In his view, “inducing moods in narrative is a means of directing thought and perception” (467) and “affective character in itself is an important part of [a film’s] aesthetic worth, since such moods are a central component of the phenomenological experience of a narrative” (473). Sinnerbrink suggests mood works through the revelation of *cinematic worlds* (148), arguing that:

...before focusing on character, action and narrative development, we should be attentive to how the particular film-world is aesthetically revealed and how we are affectively attuned to that world, since this is what makes it possible for us to be responsively engaged with what is represented within that world. (155)



The participatory elements of gameplay, the kinetic, adrenalized thrill of moving through the Zone, and the first-person audio-visual perspective afforded by the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. games raise questions about how new technological developments foster imaginative engagement.

Rhym takes a phenomenological approach to the structure of experience and the pervasiveness and sustainability of mood in time, yet his project has an affinity with Sinnerbrink’s because he is also interested in mood “as being constitutively bound up with world disclosure and as an existential condition of the possibilities of ‘affects’ and ‘emotions’” (482).

As noted earlier in this article, the atmospheric world *Stalker* inhabits and the Zone that he explores extend beyond the diegetic space of the film. In addition to the film and the 1971 novel on which it is based, *Roadside Picnic* (Arkady and Boris Strugatsky), there is a series of free-roaming first-person shooter games adapted from the film and set in the radioactive exclusion zone surrounding the nuclear power station, Chernobyl. Eerily, the first time the audience enters the Zone in the film is focalized from the optical and auditory perspective of *Stalker* himself, exactly as it occurs in the computer games when *Stalker*, the playable character, breaches the secure perimeter of the ecological disaster zone. In both cases, the audience is locked into *Stalker*’s subjectivity, acutely aware of the sound of his footfalls as we move toward an abandoned building. Participants in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2006) and its companion games¹² have an embodied relationship with the technology of the game console itself and with the military technology used to blast virtual opponents in the game world. As is conventional in such games, this sense of agency augments affective involvement but the impermanence of the player’s death curtails the incentive to imagine the consequences of violence. Yet, in other respects, the games and the film foster overlapping imaginative explorations of the space known as the Zone. The participatory elements of gameplay, the kinetic, adrenalized thrill of moving through the Zone, and the first-person audio-visual perspective

12. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky* (GSC Game World, 2008); *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Prip’yat* (GSC Game World, 2009-10).

afforded by the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games raise questions about how new technological developments foster imaginative engagement.

With a virtual reality (VR) 3D driver such as VorpX, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games can be played using VR devices like Oculus Rift and noise-cancelling stereophonic headphones. This technology gives an agentic, immersive experience of the Zone complete with the concussive impact of heavy artillery while the player navigates through the abandoned town of Pripyat and explores real landmarks, such as its rusting Ferris wheel.¹³ As Lisa Coulthard writes, sound has immersive qualities “because hearing is thought to be an intimate, more enveloping sense: sound is felt throughout the body, takes place in the head of the spectator, and is pervasive (we cannot close our ears as we can our eyes)” (“Affect” 54). While Coulthard would characterise the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games as privileging “affective intensity” over imaginative or emotional engagement, perhaps the emotive, enveloping soundscape of VR can engage imagination in novel ways. Angela McArthur and colleagues point out that VR “elicits new possibilities for the treatment of sound in space. Distinct from screen-based practices of filmmaking, diegetic sound-image relations in immersive environments present unique, potent affordances, in which content is at once imaginary, and real” (26). The merging of biological and technological perceptual apparatuses and the experience of presence and motion are augmented in VR and game environments, affording enhanced experiences of emplacement, immersion, and agency compared to cinema. As film scholar and sound designer Damian Candusso details, contemporary film sound practitioners must adapt to new forms of audio spatialisation and headphone delivery when crafting imaginative emplacement in VR environments through 3D sonic experience (1). Further research is needed in this quickly developing field, but throughout this article I have treated variances among imaginative experiences of the Zone in film versions, games, and VR as differences of degree rather than kind in terms of philosophical accounts of imaginative engagement with audiovisual media.

What have we learned from *Stalker* through this analysis of aesthetic emplacement in the acoustic and atmospheric milieu that evokes mood, focuses attention, and guides imagination through the Zone? I

13. Another audiovisual exploration of the Zone, *The Chernobyl VR Project*, uses immersive 3D sound recordings and location images captured by drones and mapped onto 3D shape scans to enable a virtual tour of the forbidden zone thirty years after the nuclear disaster, inviting participants to imagine Soviet life in the 1980s and the devastation caused by nuclear fall-out.

have argued that mood is communicated by cinema’s most immersive elements—the mise-en-scène and the tonal, tactile, enveloping qualities of the evocative, acousmatic soundscape. I have shown that mood is related to place-making and emplacement in the narrative world; similarly, emplacement can be understood as a form of mood-making in the film, games, and VR simulations that are based on the Zone that *Stalker* traverses.¹⁴ In *Stalker*, the enveloping elements of film style establish a mood that focuses the audience’s imagination on salient affective aspects of the characters’ environment and their perceptual and subjective experiences, which are rendered strange, yet hauntingly familiar through the synaesthetic translation of sound and image into affect and felt understanding. To conclude, imaginative activity does not necessarily involve forging mental copies of sensory stimuli. Instead, it works with sensory incompleteness to bridge disjunctures between sound and image and to generate suppositions and affective impressions. This elicitation of imaginative discernment through the evocation, mediation, and translation of sound and image in cinema recruits affective and cognitive activity that far exceeds the production of images.

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Moves and Countermoves: Visual Technologies of Fear and Counter-Technologies of Hope in *The Hunger Games* Quadrilogy

“Fear,” writes Robert Solomon, “is perhaps the most important emotion” (29). As unpleasant and intense as fear can be, it is a vital emotion that directs our attention to relevant details of a dangerous situation, alerts us to be on the lookout for more details that are imperative to our assessment of that situation, and encourages us to form expectations about how we should respond to its possible evolvment. However, fear is not always simply a question of being afraid of something that is potentially endangering. It can also become a form of cultural politics that, in the words of Sara Ahmed, “works to shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies . . . through othering” (1). Ahmed speaks of the spatial politics of fear that work to restrict some bodies through privileging others and to align bodily and social space by enabling “some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained” (70). Fear in this sense is anything but an immediate, affective response to an objective danger; here it functions to conserve power, making the subordinates consent to power as the possibility of dissent is linked to pain, torture, and death. In this technology of fear, publicizing visible suffering through media plays a central role.

This article studies the hugely popular and critically acclaimed *The Hunger Games* film quadrilogy, starring Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen, who survives in a world in which fear is structural and mediated through visual technologies. The series establishes Katniss as its most important ethical and narrative agent, the locus of the spectators’ emotional engagement. However, the films also embody fear independently of the protagonist insofar as their thematic and aesthetic organization can be considered fear-ridden throughout the series. The quadrilogy consists of four science fiction/action films (*The Hunger Games*

(2012), *Catching Fire* (2013), *Mockingjay Part I* (2014) and *II* (2015)) based on a dystopian trilogy of books by Suzanne Collins that depict the post-apocalyptic world of Panem. Panem is separated into twelve Districts, which are each subject to the authoritarian Capitol. The quadrilogy’s title refers to a compulsory, televised death match, for which twenty-four children from the Districts are selected each year as “tributes” to fight each other in a dangerous public arena for the entertainment of the Capitol. In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the organization of the media follows a panoptic logic that is designed both to observe and to discipline, which can be seen as an allegory for governance that uses fear as the technology of its power. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault used this idea to illustrate the way in which disciplinary societies exercise control by subjugating their citizens to asymmetrical surveillance and by consequently provoking citizens to monitor and police themselves for fear of punishment.

The Hunger Games series suggests that counter-technologies can resist these disciplinary technologies of power but that these counter-technologies are equally subject to governing disciplines. This means that while one might resist technologies of power with counter-technologies, the resistance will never be outside of power relations. Even new media technologies, while providing individuals with the means of counter-hegemonic politics of communication, remain embedded “in the political economy, social relations, and political environment within which they are produced, circulated, and received” (Kellner 2). This is why Wendy Chun talks about digital technologies not only as “freedom frontiers” but also as “dark machines of [state] control” (2). In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, actual resistance becomes a matter of individual action only. The series’ emphasis on individual action at the expense of emergent

technologies comes with a remarkably pessimistic view on media and media activism, suggesting in the spirit of Jean Baudrillard that all media is conformistic, and that the only places removed from power are areas beyond the media's reach. In the age of digital surveillance, where algorithms have replaced the central observation tower, this view is increasingly relevant since digital surveillance is invisible, and individuals are no longer aware of being watched continually (Zuboff 323).

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In his book *Screened Out*, Baudrillard writes that omnipresent screens threaten us from all directions, resulting in the abolition of distance between the receiver and the source of a transmission, between an event and the broadcasting of that event (176). One of the most critical aspects of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy is indeed the pervasiveness and ubiquity of public screens that are seamlessly positioned within private and communal spaces, shaped by panoptic principles that delineate people's bodies as well as the way in which those bodies inhabit space. These public screens are large-scale displays enabled by digital technologies, offering a virtual expansion of actual space in real time, thereby forging simultaneous connections between different physical spaces.

Thomas Elsaesser describes connections between multiple screens—not only the screens around the city streets but also the cinematic, television, computer, and mobile screens—as “horizontal.” Elsaesser's reason for this description is that we experience these screens along a parallel axis: our embodied interaction with the screens creates ever-present connections in time and space even when we are not consciously aware of these connections as a (new) media culture (17). Through screens, other people and other situations that may have nothing in common except for being elsewhere are constantly made manifest in the physical space that we occupy as embodied beings. In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, these screens enable social interaction between the Capitol and the Districts, creating formational power structures that are integrated into the citizens' everyday routines. Furthermore, they expand individuals' embodied experiences by mediating between the boundaries of the material body in the proximate, contingent world

“in here” and the distant, virtual world “out there.” This mediation is very emotional as it is amplified, shaped, diffused, and exposed through flows of communication that initially run just one way, altering the embodied perception of individuals exposed to the media-driven discourse of fear. It is through public screens that President Snow addresses the people of Panem in *Mockingjay Part I*, referring to the Districts as bodily organs that supply the Capitol, “like blood to a heart,” before ordering the Peacekeepers to shoot the Districts' rebels to death in a public execution. Snow's fearmongering practices are inseparable from the way they are displayed to Panem's citizens. The quadrilogy constantly foregrounds the mediation of Snow's acts of state terrorism through their dissemination via public screens in the *mise-en-scène*.

Such a visual technology of fear extending from private to public spaces was already imagined by George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), as the operational technology for a totalitarian government called “Big Brother.” Foucault called this technology “panopticism.” Panopticism creates an illusion of constant external surveillance, thereby enabling effective fearmongering, disciplining, and punishing of human bodies in a normalizing discourse. In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the Games are designed according to this panoptic logic, not only providing entertainment for the Capitol but also functioning as a visual technology of fear. In this sense, *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy offers a “reboot” of Foucault's panopticism, regardless of the apparent incompatibility of this notion with current technologies of digital surveillance, insofar as the series presents it as a structural, omnipresent, and harmful modality of power.

The Games were invented in the first place to remind the districts of the Capitol's power and its lack of compassion for the failed rebellion orchestrated by District 13. In this system, fear works as an imperative for the Capitol's power: fear is the punishment for rebellion, the promise of a secure society, and the elimination of disorder. The Games fulfill this function as the original rebellion's public aftermath, submitting the tributes to panoptic exposure as bodies that inflict lethal danger upon each other while broadcast live to eager spectators, until one victor remains



and order is restored. The similarities between such enactment of public exposure and “game-docs” like *Big Brother* (1999-) are obvious, and the ways in which they undermine human agency and dignity have regularly been at the centre of debates on the ethics of reality television (Jermyn 80).

The world of Panem is a world in which the Capitol’s power is visibly omnipresent, and there is no way that its inhabitants can act freely of its constraints. Throughout Panem, order is maintained by a military police force called the Peacekeepers, whose apparel—shining white armour, black leather accessories—not only symbolizes authority but also functions as a highly noticeable reminder of the Capitol’s authority and power. The pervasive and constant, but anonymous visibility of the Peacekeepers suggests that Panem’s inhabitants are being scrutinized at all times. While the omnipresent, enormous public screens suggest a situation designed to ensure surveillance that is both wide-ranging and selective, they also function as a visible reminder of an all-pervading, panoptic gaze. This panoptic gaze is also present as a voice that is reminiscent of what Michel Chion calls *acousmètre*. An *acousmètre* is neither inside nor outside the film’s diegesis and therefore has no perceivable limits to its power (129-31). In the first instalment of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the *acousmètre* is present as a disembodied voice-over for a propaganda film *à la* Leni Riefenstahl. In the film’s Reaping scene, this voice manifests as a masculine, smooth, and reassuring authority associated with an all-perceiving eye that looks both back in time and forward to the future. At the same time, it assumes the function of the omniscient author-god in narrative fiction. In other words, the voice appropriates the function of the central watchtower in the panopticon. It becomes an acoustic “gaze” that is not experienced visually but acoustically, prompting awareness of an authority one cannot escape or close off one’s ears from. Sound in general and the voice in particular can effectively assume this function since it is not experienced somewhere “out there,” separate from one’s subject position, but it creates a “‘here’, or rather a ‘there’ + ‘here’” (Stilwell 173).

According to Chion, when the embodied source of the *acousmètre* is revealed—when the voice is “de-



In The Hunger Games quadrilogy, tele-visuality functions as a visual technology of fear that extends into people’s homes, blurring the line between the private and public sphere.

acousmatized”—it loses its authority (129). However, in the first *Hunger Games* film, when we learn during the tribute parade that the voice-over belongs to President Snow, this does not come with an accompanying loss of power. When the source of Snow’s voice is incorporated into the visual field, the composition of the image confirms rather than denies its authority, placing him in the foreground of a wide-angle shot of the Capitol like a conductor of an orchestra, or the “master of ceremonies,” as Chion puts it (129). The diagonal line of his gesturing arms continues along the diagonal of an enormous boulevard cleaving the Capitol, which is lined up with stands filled with cheering spectators. Even though Snow’s voice becomes embodied at this point, it remains omnipotent. It is only once we learn about his weakness in *Catching Fire* that the voice starts to lose its authority, a moment conveyed very powerfully by the image of Snow spitting blood into his champagne glass.

In many ways, the figure of Snow is an epitome of panoptic power, his towering televisual presence powerfully captured in a teaser for *Mockingjay Part I*. This teaser takes the form of a propaganda video in which Snow smoothly addresses Panem while seated on a gleaming white throne as words like “unity” and “prosperity” appear on an all-white background.¹ John Thornton Caldwell calls “televsuality” of this kind “epic” and links it to authority and power. By exploiting its ability to distort truth through an excessive visual style and imposing, persuasive utterances, epic televisuality is an instrument that programs real-world authority and cultural hegemony (Caldwell 191). In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, televisuality functions as a visual technology of fear that extends into people’s homes, blurring the line between the private and public sphere. This is one way in which the quadrilogy “reboots” Foucauldian panopticism in today’s age of digital surveillance: it networks private spheres into the public arena through its

1. *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy closely associates the colour white with Snow, particularly through the white roses that function as important props throughout the series. These metonymic elements gain an ever-increasing symbolic power as the story progresses. While white roses are customarily associated with love and innocence, they become not only a metonym for Snow in *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, but also a metaphor for death and the panoptic presence of the state authority to be felt and internalized much more generally.

ubiquitous televisuality which records and transmits mandatory newscashes of actual events in real time.

This televisual presence that occupies a central place in the panoptic system of Panem, constantly degrades its citizens to “objects of information,” never enabling them as “subjects in communication” (Foucault 200). Furthermore, the format of reality television itself is of an obvious panoptic nature, (involuntarily) recording, monitoring, and exposing its “prisoners” twenty-four hours a day. During the Games, the powers of surveillance and exposure are constantly there. For instance, they take the form of “in-depth” interviews in front of a live audience. In the game arena itself, the cameras are omnipresent, both airborne and on the ground, encapsulated in trees or hidden in other objects, allowing the Gamemakers and the spectators to follow the action regardless of the tributes’ movements or location, since trackers have even been inserted into their arms. At one point, Katniss finds a camera in a tree that she is sleeping in. This functions as a reminder both for herself and for the spectator of how she is constantly being observed by the people of Panem as they watch the Games. The next shot of the interior of a control room reveals that her surveillance coincides from various angles. This shot also demonstrates that the act of surveillance and control is not a matter of vision only. It appears that the control room contains a sizeable virtual replica of the arena that can be used to manipulate the weather conditions in the arena or its time of day by touching an equivalent virtual point. Janez Strehovec calls this a form of “digital tangible,” referring to the way in which in our changed relationship with media, the digital, and the sense of touch are linked by new media technologies, blurring the line between proximity and distance (57).

[Katniss’s] performance of love is part of a strategic game, a tactical choice that can potentially reverse the power dynamics, as she is both the author and the object to-be-looked-at of her personal “love” story.

Thus, in *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, it is significant that the acts of violence by the Peacekeepers and the suffering of the Districts’ inhabitants are covered live as a fear-mongering strategy in which visual technologies play a central role. First, the game arena is manipulated to Katniss’s disadvantage as a result of the Gamemakers’ panoptic access to her game strategy. Later, in *Catching Fire*, fear is sown in District 12 under the command of a new, sadistic Head Peacekeeper, who eliminates his predecessor, shuts down the black market, and burns all contraband. Aired live to



all of Panem’s citizens, the violent scene climaxes with Katniss’s friend Gale tied to a post in the centre of the town square and ruthlessly whipped. In *Mockingjay Part I*, Snow gives an order to attack a hospital full of injured rebels and to televise its destruction. Finally, in *Mockingjay Part II*, the Capitol itself—now an urban war zone—is turned into a game arena with a minefield of the Gamemakers’ sadistic inventions, designed to make a public spectacle of the rebels’ deaths.

Through visual technologies of fear, the Capitol’s power is thus omnipresent throughout the world of Panem. Nevertheless, this power is not omnipotent, for, in the words of Foucault, “there is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power” (*Power/Knowledge* 138). In other words, there always remains a residue in the relations between individuals that manages to avoid social power: “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight” (“Subject” 225). According to Foucault, even though one can never be free from power relations completely, one can provocatively engage with them through “practices of freedom” (“Ethic”). In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss “practices freedom” by self-consciously performing in the direction of the cameras. After Rue dies, Katniss adorns the young girl’s body with flowers, then looks directly into the camera and greets it with the three finger salute. The film then cuts to the same image of Katniss projected onto the screens in a public square. In response, District 11’s inhabitants return the salutation and then start to riot against the Peacekeepers in a violent scene that quickly skids out of control and culminates in destruction by fire, until order is violently restored.² Later Katniss “performs love” towards Peeta, her fellow tribute from District 12, in front of the cameras in order to manipulate the Games to her advantage. Her performance of love is part of a strategic game, a tactical choice that can potentially reverse the power dynamics, as she is both the author and the object to-be-looked-at of her personal “love” story.

2. The raised arm salute became an unofficial symbol of opposition during Thailand’s coup in May 2014, and a creative response to several bans the junta had placed on freedom of expression.

Apart from Katniss's emotional performance, visual technologies can themselves be harnessed as practices of freedom, which opens up possibilities of two-way creation and the sharing of meaning.

Apart from Katniss's emotional performance, visual technologies can themselves be harnessed as practices of freedom, which opens up possibilities of two-way creation and the sharing of meaning. John Downing calls this form of technology "rebellious communication" that not only confronts established political institutions but also challenges the way in which information is produced (99). Rebellious communication operates collectively, not hierarchically, forming networks of groups that become a social movement, such as the Districts in *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy. In *Mockingjay Part I* and *II*, the rebels of communication produce "propos" (propaganda messages) as part of the Airtime Assault on the Capitol, which are transmitted after hacking the signal defence that protects the Capitol's broadcasting system. On their computer screen, the Capitol's defence system has a panoptic form, with a circle in the middle that is surrounded by wedges, closely resembling the symbol of an all-seeing eye surrounded by rays of light, watching over everything. In the hacking scene, Beetee, an electronic wizard from District 3, has to find his way digitally through the electronic defence system that he himself designed. At the same time, the District's rebels physically attack the Capitol's power plants, thereby limiting the range of frequencies available in its broadcasting system. This disruption enables Beetee to interrupt the Capitol's broadcasting with propos that feature Katniss visiting District 12, which had been destroyed, or District 8 while heavily under attack.

When visiting these, and other places, a highly emotional Katniss is constantly filmed by a crew, also known as Squad 451,³ that have cameras built into their body armour as prosthetic, physical media extensions of the self. This idea of a prosthesis was present already in Marshall McLuhan's seminal text *Understanding Media*, in which he used the concept to explain media's function as an extension of oneself (7). That Squad 451's cameras can be seen as extensions of the self is significant, as it demonstrates how the body and its emotions facilitate both media production and political activism. Thus, the body itself becomes the site for political struggle both within (cameras as body armour) and without (the visible, affective body of Kat-

3. Perhaps a reference to Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

niss). The footage that is gained in this way by Squad 451 is then intertwined with and superimposed on the Capitol's newflashes, bridged by random dot pixel patterns that one might see in an analogue television transmission. This pirate broadcasting's noise not only literally but also figuratively jams the Capitol's defence systems. It allows the rebels first to commandeer the system, then to unshackle all of Panem, and finally to end the war with a two-tiered explosion targeted at the Capitol's children, with the whole collapse aired live.



As a sonic phenomenon, noise is typically conceived as a communication system's residue, a disorderly, chaotic sound in comparison to more orderly and meaningful modes of expression, such as language or music (Godard et al. 2). However, it is precisely that residual aspect of noise that renders it a productive, subversive means of creating and sharing alternative experiences. For instance, even though Foucault is suspicious of individuals as agents of resistance against the constellations of power, he nevertheless acknowledges within them a "residual power" that allows them the possibility to resist the consolidation of power in systems of governance (Conway 68). In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, due to their residual power to interrupt and interfere with governing political forms, hackers are the agents of resistance. Within this context, Gabriella Coleman writes of hackers as significant technological users operating as political actors, who use hacking as legitimate dissent tactics against state power. Instead of conceiving of hacking as the transgressive practice of malicious computer geeks and trolls, she approaches the phenomenon as expressing dissent towards the establishment by "reordering the technologies and infrastructures that have become part of the fabric of everyday life" in order to politicize "actors to engage in actions outside of the technological realm" (515).

In *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy, the practice of hacking functions as a defiant interference against the pathologies of authoritarianism and gives the citizens of Panem

hope. In this process, the dividing line between “objects of information” and “subjects in communication” in the panoptic system becomes increasingly blurred, giving rise to hope for potential change against Snow’s fearmongering discursive practices. Thus, the central opposition of fear and hope that is initially established in the quadrilogy’s first instalment does not only occur on the thematic level. It is also represented in the technological “moves and countermoves” that manifest themselves as the game unfolds, both on the micro level of the game arena, and the macro level of battle between the Capitol and the Districts. In *Mockingjay Part I* there is a scene, in which a physically and emotionally tortured Peeta addresses Katniss directly via a mandatory newflash: “How will this end? What will be left? No one can survive this. No one is safe now. Not here in the Capitol. Not in any of the Districts.” This discourse of fear is hijacked and mixed with subversive footage of Katniss in the ruins of District 12, singing the “Hanging Tree” song as an emotional rallying cry for rebellion. Aesthetically, this hijacking is represented by pixelated dissolves between the Capitol’s footage and the rebels’ footage, elucidating visually the way in which the rebellion literally takes place on the airwaves by means of counter-technologies that enable unruly interaction with hegemonic technologies. The scene shows that in all systems of transmission, the flow of communication can run both ways and political resistance can be enacted. Political resistance of this kind has been attributed to the rise of new communication technologies, but as John Michael Robert points out, these technologies also run the risk of re-transforming the subjects into objects of communication as soon as they become established (7). Indeed, the ending of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy suggests that as soon as the resistance becomes the new establishment, the media conforms, and the only means of defiance that can be realized is through individual action, such as by Katniss from outside of the establishment. Hers is a strategy of angrily reasserting her idiosyncrasy, doing what is least expected from her in the panoptic system, despite still residing within that system.

The ending of the quadrilogy corresponds with the Foucauldian insight that subjective agency’s individualist paradigm remains subservient to collective, normalizing



disciplines, as in the end Katniss is exiled to District 12, separated from the panoptic gaze, but also separated from the means to resist its power. Of course, her anonymity from that gaze is possible within a very limited space, and as soon as she leaves that space, she re-appears in the panoptic matrix. In this context, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson speak of the “disappearance of disappearance,” the current impossibility of anonymous existence outside technologies of surveillance (620). The final, happy scenes of *Mockingjay Part II* that show Katniss serenely enjoying her family in the middle of nature are then strangely disappointing, pessimistic even, since they imply that individual resistance to mechanisms of panoptic power is but an illusory ideal. However, it is still one nevertheless worth striving toward. In conclusion, what this Foucauldian informed reading of *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy has hoped to show, is that *The Hunger Games* quadrilogy is more than an illustration of the philosopher’s complex ideas about media, power, and resistance. Rather, this emotionally driven series first and foremost prompts us to reflect upon these ideas by experiencing them from the inside, through a strong affective engagement with its female protagonist as she bravely orchestrates her moves and countermoves.

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Archive Rushes: On Truth and Lie in Adam Curtis's *HyperNormalisation*

Smoke and Mirrors

Torchlight, deep in the dark woods at night, tracing the snaking boughs, tangled branches, and lacing ivies of an ancient tree. This image is the opening shot of *HyperNormalisation* (Curtis 2016)—a complex of metaphor, metonym, and anthropomorphism. The torch is the camera and the camera the eye; an illusory recursion illuminating that which is stumbled-upon. A contingent encounter which fascinates but at the same moment ensnares and obscures; an image which is both signal and symbol of what is to come. “We live,” proclaims director and narrator Adam Curtis, “in strange times.” A boat in the open sea, capsizing, a few refugees failing to cling to the upturned hull, hundreds of people in the water; Trump, with entourage, waves serenely to the camera; Putin, stationed in front of a microphone, shrugs. *HyperNormalisation* comes on in a cascade, a collage of found fragments from the cutting room floor. These disparate visual images avalanche with a soundtrack of ambient synths and syncopated beats, left-field pop, country and western, drones and feedback. All accompanied by the ever-present and unrelenting voice of Curtis: “Over the last forty years, politicians, financiers, and technological utopians rather than face up to the real complexities of the world, retreated.” A white man in a black T-shirt proclaiming “Fuck Islam!,” “Make America Great Again” on a red baseball cap; a plastic air-dancer, buffeted by the wind, arises. “Instead,” continues Curtis, “they constructed a simpler version of the world in order to hang on to power ... And as this fake world grew, *all of us went along with it.*” *HyperNormalisation* takes us from the United States to the Middle East to the Soviet Union, and from the present to the 1960s and back again. Alongside Putin and Trump, we encounter other such phenomena as Hafez al-Assad and Henry Kissinger; financial crashes; suicide bombings; hippies, freaks, and

various countercultures; the emergence of the internet, hackers, and mega-techs; the cold war; Osama bin Laden and 9/11; Jane Fonda workout videos; and UFOs (sort of). “*All of us went along with it.* Because the simplicity was reassuring.” The opening sequence of *HyperNormalisation* ends in a domestic kitchen—the camera tilts to discover a bloodied floor, the aftermath of carnage, someone has been dragged away after bleeding out, the camera tracks the arterial smear through the rooms and into the yard outside...

HyperNormalisation is a 166-minute documentary created for and released via the online BBC iPlayer platform. The images are culled (mostly) from the BBC Television Archive, a Library of Babel-like storehouse of broadcasts and unedited rushes collecting decades of programmes and reportage. The film argues that the complexity of the world has been effaced by political, economic, and technological power structures by way of the propagation of simple and sure narratives. Curtis calls this a “make-believe world,” a “fake world,” a world of “trickery,” a “dream-world.” Yet, in just this way, power maintains some semblance of control by feeding off the desires of people: certainty over ambiguity, permanence over change, sameness over difference. Such reciprocity and collusion between power and desire cohere into a vicious circle of socio-political stasis where “nothing ever changes.” Curtis’s response: rather than retreat from the complexity of the world, we must learn to accept and affirm uncertainty, transience, and heterogeneity. *HyperNormalisation* undermines simple and sure narratives by exposing opacities, ambiguities, and paradoxes, using cinematic strategies of defamiliarization to sustain complexity. The documentary is a flow of disparate images that composes a disjunctive narration and creates a dispersive narrative. Thus, while the film has its origins in documentary journalism, its storytelling is akin to free-form improvisation or cut-up; *HyperNormalisation* undermines, rather than abides,

the contemporary norms of televisual journalistic praxis (industry-standard communication techniques such as simple linear storytelling and the confrontational interview). The film prefers complexity over certainty to break open the vicious circle of socio-political stasis. Rather than closing down thought through reification, reiteration, and premastication, *HyperNormalisation* opens up thought.

According to Curtis, what is essential to these disruptive and productive procedures is that he created the film within the new media eco-system. For the director, the iPlayer platform is a space that allows an escape from the formats, rules, and clichés of television's investigative journalism. Curtis states, iPlayer "offers an extraordinary place to experiment," a space "to tell stories that allow you to explore and explain the strangeness of our modern world in a new way. Complex, interwoven stories that reflect the ... unpredictability of our time" (Curtis qtd. in IW). The medium—so goes the infamous formulation from Marshall McLuhan—is the message (7). For Curtis, then, the procedures of *HyperNormalisation* are a consequence of the platform upon which it was shared and for which it was created. New media journalist Natasha Lomas frames it thus: Curtis's iPlayer documentary work counteracts the "over-simple stories" of old media "linear broadcasting" with "online" narratives that are "both richer and more confusing, more complex and more true" (par. 18). Lomas argues that new media allows Curtis to produce new kinds of stories that are multi-layered and ambiguous, that foreground complexity and so reveal the truth. The equation here is new media equals complexity, and—in turn—such complexity equals truth.

Rather than closing down thought through reification, reiteration, and premastication, HyperNormalisation opens up thought.

Yet, we must immediately ask: can we really believe this series of audacious assertions? With this formula, we encounter a troubling and infernal conflation: new media can somehow guarantee truth. Such a privileging of the internet seems ever more impossible to affirm. As Julia Carrie Wong summarises, the online worlds of YouTube, Google, Facebook, and Twitter implicitly sanction "the proliferation of fake news, conspiracy mongering, and propaganda" (par. 10). Even the creators of these services—such as Facebook's founding president Sean Parker, and once vice-president for user growth Chamath Palihapitiya—now echo analogous critiques (Wong, pars.



1-2, 5-6). Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, concurs, seeing the internet increasingly becoming a space of surveillance, disinformation, and indoctrination (pars. 2-3, 4, 5). Such valuations rebound upon *HyperNormalisation*. Stephen Dalton writes that the "arguments [of the film] are selective, subjective and powered by questionable leaps of logic" (par. 4); and Brandon Harris believes the documentary reveals "corners that have been cut and ... gaps that have been just barely sutured" (par. 11). David Jenkins goes even further, accusing Curtis of "secretly getting high on his own supply. He uses smoke and mirrors to attack the smoke and mirrors" (par. 4). Accordingly, *HyperNormalisation* conspires in the very problems it attempts to expose: sleight of hand, conspiracy, and lies.

HyperNormalisation appears captured within a whole set of embedded discourses: new and old media, simple and complex narration, claims of truth and lie. Where—then—is the problem with the Lomas equation? Without a doubt, the new media landscape appears infinitely complex. Thus, the problem with the formula seems to be with the second moment, where complexity equals truth. Surely truth depends on the exact opposite of complexity: the resolution of ambiguities, clarity rather than confusion, certainty over doubt? However, my argument in this essay will be that such complexity (ambiguity, confusion, and doubt) does indeed guarantee truth. This proposition, nevertheless, will depend upon a still radical understanding of the truth. Accordingly, to make this argument I will turn to philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's early unpublished but foundational essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873). Concomitantly, if we are to escape the infernal conflation of new media with truth, then the counterargument must be that new media in no way guarantees complexity. This side of the proposition will be explored and affirmed with Janet H. Murray's seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of*

Narrative in Cyberspace (1997). And as we shall see, and despite how it may appear—Curtis too, after Murray, escapes this trap, and alongside Nietzsche, has a radical understanding of the nature of truth.

Something You Wouldn't Put on Television

For several decades, television was Curtis's medium of choice. In the early 1980s, the director cut his teeth on investigative journalism, working on programmes for BBC series such as *Just Another Day* (1983-86), *40 Minutes* (1981-94), and *Inside Story* (1974-). However, it was in the 1990s that the filmmaker really made his name. *Pandora's Box* (1992) saw Curtis write and direct an epic six-part documentary serial, with episodes exploring subjects as diverse as games theory and the arms race, the economies of the USSR and UK, the history of DDT insecticide, and post-colonialism in Ghana. In these programmes, Curtis interconnects stories to explore themes of politics and finance, psychology and culture, science and technology. Foregrounding the resources of the BBC Television Archive and incorporating specially filmed interviews, we see the emergence of the director's mosaic style. Previously unused or only partially used found footage is deployed to compose a visual tapestry for which Curtis provides voice-over. This style would be further developed and refined over the years to come. With *The Century of the Self* (2002), Curtis reads the twentieth century from the perspective of psychoanalysis and capitalism through the practices of Sigmund Freud and his nephew, Matthew Freud. *The Power of Nightmares* (2004) considers the reciprocity between Western neo-liberalism and Islamist terror. *The Trap* (2007) is an exposé of notions of human liberty. Finally, *All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace* (2011) looks at the pseudo-scientific belief that everything in the world can be controlled. In each of these serials, Curtis unpicks the warp and weft of the narrative webs that politics, economics, and technology weave to capture us.

Yet, after *Machines of Loving Grace*, something would change. Late in 2007, the BBC's online iPlayer service went live in the United Kingdom. Its original purpose was to function as a catch-up service for the corporation's post-broadcast television and radio programmes (Laughlin). Rebooted in 2011, iPlayer was reoriented as a "video-on-demand service" that now also featured "the best from the [BBC] catalogue stretching back 50 to 60 years" (Bradley-Jones qtd. in Dredge, par. 5). In the wake of this, as well as a result of advancements in UK telecommunications infrastructure and parallel developments in video streaming software, Curtis came to realize iPlayer had even more

potential. "You can use it," he argued in a speech to BBC executives, "in a more adventurous way"—for the creation of original content (Curtis qtd. in Godwin, par. 4). As he tells it, Curtis was commissioned the very next day to produce the first original iPlayer release (Godwin, par. 5). Exploring thirteen years of war in Afghanistan, Curtis developed *Bitter Lake* (2015) from footage discovered by camera operator Phil Goodwin in a BBC studio in Kabul. Goodwin "sat there for weeks with his laptop, digitising it all ... tapes of everything we'd shot there over the last 40 years, the rushes, the unedited material ... he came back with 26 terabytes" (Curtis qtd. in MacInnes, par. 6). Critic Paul MacInnes comments: *Bitter Lake* has "different qualities" to Curtis' broadcast serials because it was "[f]reed from the constraints of TV schedules," it is "dreamlike," "a strange experience," proceeding "much slower" with "lingering unedited shots" (MacInnes, pars. 8, 9). Created using only the rushes from the BBC Afghanistan archive, the director (finally and completely) does away with filming his own anchoring interviews. Instead, the documentary submerges the viewer within the duration of an event: an event that is complex and multiplicitous, with silences, forgettings, paradoxes, and contradictions. Curtis puts it this way: "I wanted to create something you wouldn't put on television" (Curtis qtd. in MacInnes, par. 10). The proposition seems to be that the differences in praxis between the serials and *Bitter Lake* are a direct result of the medium for which the content was produced. As Lomas sees it, the "edited time slot[s]" demanded by television are "allergic to complexity;" whereas the medium of the web enables Curtis to achieve a "new, more pluralist format for storytelling—one that supports the transmitting of multiple ... decentralized perspectives" (Lomas, pars. 14, 18). "I struggle," writes filmmaker Charlie Lyne of Curtis's *HyperNormalisation* (his second documentary for iPlayer) "to think of a more



Adam Curtis, director of BBC's *HyperNormalisation*.

perfect union of medium and message” (par. 1), overtly nodding to McLuhan.

With *HyperNormalisation*, Curtis pushes the techniques of *Bitter Lake* even further. The scope of the narration is far more expansive and oblique: jumping from one spatiotemporal domain to another; there are flashbacks and leaps forward; stories are interrupted with other tales; the choice of images is more diverse, obscure, and bizarre; and there are abrupt shifts in tone. Drama turns into horror, horror into comedy, comedy into tragedy. There are (seemingly, at first) even irrelevant moments. Teenage girls dancing to hip-hop on social media; a man scraping human flesh from the street after a terrorist bombing; singer and artist Patty Smith in a car, musing on the power of graffiti; hippies in the woods spaced-out on LSD; Islamist martyrdom videos with hugging wannabe terrorists; old-school CGI rendering (now) crappy-looking digital worlds. Alongside such reportage and online footage, Curtis also appropriates films such as *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), *Carrie* (1976), *Stalker* (1979), *TRON* (1982), and *The Rock* (1996), as well as a whole host of late 1990s American apocalypse movies.

HyperNormalisation is digital-baroque: a complex, intense, polyphonic experience—an ornate online documentary enfolding news reportage, YouTube footage, movies, music, and voice.

Using shots from *Independence Day* (1996), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Godzilla* (1998), and *Armageddon* (1998), Curtis creates a sublime meditation on the shock and awe of terror. With a superimposed soundtrack of Suicide’s minimalist electro-punk hymn “Dream Baby Dream” (1979), this music video-like segment is composed of two sequences. The first recuts dozens of the movies’ images: faces and bodies suspended in wonder, confusion, surprise, and fear. Children on a stoop, staring up into the sky; drivers in stalled traffic, staring up into the sky; the US President and staff outside the White House, staring up into the sky. Everything is in stasis. Prefacing this moment is the chapter title “America at the end of the twentieth century” and reportage of attacks by Islamist jihadists across the Middle East. Curtis zeroes-in on some BBC news reports of terrorist atrocities in Jerusalem: the burned-out and blackened shell of a passenger bus, a marketplace strewn with corpses. Curtis’s voice-over declares that in the wake of such attacks, the United States of America “[be]came possessed by dark forebodings.” Everyone in American

society, “not only the politicians but the scientists, the journalists, and all kinds of experts” became “focus[ed] on the dangers that might be hidden in the future. This, in turn, created a pessimistic mood that began to ... infect the whole of the culture.” The first sequence of Hollywood apocalypse movies ends with a screen title: “All these films were made before 2001.” The second sequence recuts the apocalypse movies’ destruction of iconic skyscrapers and buildings: the White House is devastated with an electric blue laser beam; the Empire State building explodes, material and people raining down on the streets below; Grand Central Terminal collapses in upon itself; a giant tsunami overwhelms the twin towers of the original World Trade Center. Next, Curtis cuts to a collage of mobile phone footage of 9/11. *HyperNormalisation* is digital-baroque: a complex, intense, polyphonic experience—an ornate online documentary enfolding news reportage, YouTube footage, movies, music, and voice.

Towards Complexity

However, we must immediately ask in what way the disparate images, disjunctive narration, and dispersive narrative of *HyperNormalisation* are an effect of the iPlayer platform. Are the claims for this documentary as a new media artifact justified? Are we simply witnessing an ongoing evolution in Curtis’s praxis? Is this just the colonization of new media by old media? Janet H. Murray—author of the seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997)—encourages us to be rightly suspicious. The MIT researcher believes that the digital medium should be productive “not by imitating existing standards for traditional media ... but by maximising the expressive power of digital representation” (Murray 114). The problem is that “[l]egacy traditions” such as television and movies “exert a powerful influence,” and thus we encounter an “additive form” (114). The additive form is merely a re-platforming of old media artifacts onto new media environments with pseudo-digital frills and a new media façade. The computer with its online presence should instead fulfil the “promise” of its “new expressive power” to provide “special possibilities for storytelling” (113). For Murray, this new power is captured in the formula: “Interactivity ↔ Immersion” (114). Interactive spaces invite the spectator to become a participant in the very production of the narration, a rich and complex encyclopaedic environment with the depth and breadth of a real world, a world which can change and transform, generated as it is from the potential of pure code and leading to an experience of unfolding and enfolding spatial immersion. Thus, such a reconceptualization of

immersion and interactivity are proper to computational narratives and can no longer be applied to the experience of artifacts originating on broadcast television and at the cinema. In this way, *HyperNormalisation* would appear to be a cuckoo's egg.

Although, there is another—far more subtle—way of approaching the question of *HyperNormalisation* and the digital medium. For instance, Lyne sees something very different going on. Curtis's filmmaking is indeed affected by new media but not by way of a change of platform (television to the web). Rather, Curtis's earlier broadcast serials were already made in a style that anticipated the online documentaries to come. *Pandora's Box*, *Century of the Self*, *Power of Nightmares*, *The Trap*, and *Machines of Loving Grace* were already of and inspired by the computational era, envisioned, produced, and developed alongside and in response to the evolution of the internet. In this way, the promise increasingly inherent in his televised serials was merely affirmed and accentuated by the transfer to iPlayer with *Bitter Lake* and *HyperNormalisation*. "Though he's spent the best part of four decades making television," concludes Lyne, "Curtis's signature blend of hypnotic archive footage, authoritative voiceover and a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for bizarre historical tangents is better suited to the web ... like a man who's two-dozen browser tabs into a major Wikipedia binge" (pars. 1, 2). And we can go even further than this. Curtis's films are composed of found footage originating with and produced by other filmmakers, documentarians, and the public, images repurposed from the BBC Archive, YouTube, and the movies. Curtis creates a collage of other voices from a multiplicity of sources. We should therefore not hesitate before, nor recoil from, Lyne's peripeteia. Furthermore, it is one Murray also suggested some twenty years earlier. Not only is the additive form "an inevitable part of the evolution of the medium" but, reciprocally, "traditions of storytelling are continuous and feed into one another" (Murray 115, 34-35). Old media does not simply colonize new media. Instead, television and film respond to and are transformed by the digital medium.

We do not know and cannot define with any certainty where an old medium ends and a new medium begins.

One medium does not necessarily replace another. They develop and feed into one another, effect and affect one another, resonate and reciprocate: anticipations and experiments create hybrids and monstrous fusions. Nothing is pure.



While new technology is generative of new forms and styles, we should not expect these new forms and styles to drop from the sky, to arrive ready-made. They will take time to become what they will. On the one hand, new digital technologies must be seen as the most recent historical medium in a whole series of territorial shifts from "the bardic lyre, to the printing press, to the secular theatre, to the movie camera, to the television screen" (Murray x). The forms of an earlier medium necessarily mutate via the subsequent medium. On the other hand, as a correlate and in a radical future-active movement, the advent of any emergent technology will have increasingly destructive *and* generative effects on the forms and styles of pre-existing mediums. Murray writes: "in the incunabular days of the narrative computer, we can see how twentieth-century novels ... have been steadily pushing against the boundaries of linear storytelling" (35). Similarly, "before the invention of the motion picture camera, the prose fiction of the nineteenth century began to experiment with filmic techniques," we "catch glimpses of the coming cinema in Emily Brontë's complex use of flashback, in Dickens' crosscuts between intersecting stories, and in Tolstoy's battlefield panoramas that dissolve into close-up vignettes of a single soldier" (35). One medium does not necessarily replace another. They develop and feed into one another, effect and affect one another, resonate and reciprocate: anticipations and experiments create hybrids and monstrous fusions. Nothing is pure. These forms subsist and intermix: music videos, e-books, television-plays, operas live broadcast to cinemas, and streaming services creating and platforming movies and programmes. Thus, it is telling that Murray does not use terms such as old media and new media, preferring specific digital and computational nomenclature: the digital medium enables the production of what she will variously call the "computational narrative," the "digital narrative," the "multiform narrative," and the "kaleidoscopic narrative" (xiv, 43, 74, 196). We do not find here (no matter how unconsciously) the smuggling-in of a binary, oppositional, and hierarchical model captured in the designations of the old and the new, adjectival descriptions favoured and

defended by theorists such as Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* (2001) and “New Media From Borges to HTML” (2003). Rather than foregrounding temporal succession, we encounter with *Hamlet on the Holodeck* atemporal and aspatial differences, interpenetrations, and indeterminacies.

HyperNormalisation is an online-film, immersive and interactive in its own way due to both its production and consumption. A film, for Lyne, which “embraces the peculiarities of online viewing, trusting that its audience—if confused—will skip back 20 minutes to refresh their memories, or supplement Curtis’s argument with research of their own ... each viewer must decide for themselves how exactly to navigate the experience” (par. 5). Yet, Curtis is no technological utopian. As the director tells Jon Ronson in conversation: while—for example—social media may be “a powerful new tool for helping to organise people ... what it really doesn’t offer is a new kind of political way of changing the world. And, in fact, the belief that it does, and the failure of that, can lead to the most conservative situation” (qtd. in Ronson, par. 29). People become “trapped in an echo chamber,” “trapped in a system of feedback reinforcement,” “a kind of mutual grooming,” and when something breaks through the walls of such cells the elements within “react furiously and try to eject that destabilising fragment and regain stability” (pars. 31, 34, 36). The simple and sure trumps complexity, ambiguity, and indetermination. It has always been this way. And it always will. No medium is inherently better at complexity than another. “I know that in five years’ time, everyone’s going to watch everything on iPlayer, so let’s get in there before the bureaucrats do” (Curtis qtd. in MacInnes, par. 10). It is not the medium that gives an artifact its complexity, nor its simplicity. The medium is not the only message. It is the power of the owners of the medium and the platform, and the desires of their users that are essential here. It is reciprocity between power and desire that either cohere into a vicious circle of socio-political stasis or open up onto complexity.

The Truth Is Out There

HyperNormalisation is named after a neologism from a book by Alexei Yurchak: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2005). Yurchak coins the term *hypernormalisation* to describe the collective cultural delusion at the heart of the late Soviet regime (1960s-80s) (47-50). Normalization describes a process whereby some way of thinking can be socially engineered to become popular and dominant. Thus, it is essentially a neutral term, but depending upon provenance can have broadly

progressive or reactionary objectives. In the Anglophonic world, the concept was developed in the late 1960s in the natural and social sciences through empirical and theoretical methods, having the aim of embedding reformist policies in the domain of intellectual disability (see, for instance, Nirje; Bronston; May et al.). More recent cultural examples of such normalisation would be that of state affirmations of gay marriage and transgender rights in response to activist pressure. However, in the popular consciousness, the term tends to be employed to identify the promotion of reactionary and regressive attitudes: the normalisation of nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. It is this usage that Yurchak signals with hypernormalisation (or extreme normalisation), a process which not only “affect[ed] all levels of linguistic, textual, and narrative structure but also became an end in itself” (50). Political, economic, technological, and cultural language becomes “monosemic” and self-referential, that is, “freed from ambiguity and indeterminacy” in order to maintain the status quo (50). For Curtis, after Yurchak, simple, monosemic narratives are what constitute a false expression of the world. As the historian Mary Beard asks: “What is the role of an academic, no matter what they’re teaching, within political debate?”—the answer: “It has to be that they make issues more complicated. The role of the academic is to make everything less simple” (qtd. in Williams, par. 4). For Curtis, complex, ambiguous, indeterminate narratives allow an encounter with the truth. How can we understand such an idea?

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s early unpublished but foundational essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1873) provides a pathway. For Nietzsche, all truth is illusory, but that does not mean that there is no truth. Nietzsche puts forward the disturbing proposition that there are truths everywhere, truths of different systems, different types, and different intensities. There is a multiplicity of truths. A cacophony of truths. A war of truths. Nonetheless—and necessarily so—there are two



fundamental conceptions of truth: one that is conceived as “fixed” (eternal, universal, and binding) and another that is conceived as “illusion” (aesthetic, historical, and perspectival) (Nietzsche 255, 256). In short, truth either denies or accepts its illusory nature. Accordingly (and paradoxically), illusory truth could be said to be *more true* than fixed truth. This is because it incorporates both the drive for truth, and, at the same moment, its own contingency. Truth—writes Nietzsche, in one of the most well-known sentences in philosophy—is a “mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms ... which, after lengthy use, seem firm, canonical and binding” (257). It is only when we forget, repress, and deny the complex, paradoxical, ever-changing appearances of the world and bind ourselves to a structure of solid, irrefutable, unitary truth that we feel orientated. Nietzsche’s response: accepting the illusory nature of truth is a “smashing ... [of] this structure,” and while disorientating, allows us to be “free and released from ... habitual slavery,” and allows the creation of new truths (263).

Accordingly (and paradoxically), illusory truth could be said to be more true than fixed truth. This is because it incorporates both the drive for truth, and, at the same moment, its own contingency.

Such a problematization of truth remains controversial. At first, we might see Nietzsche’s philosophy as liberating. But then how do we affirm that which we know must be true? Does not Nietzsche lead us to those who trundle out alternative facts and false logic? To the president of the USA tweeting and retweeting false truths; to conspiracy theorists with red flags; to the twin towers being destroyed by the CIA, FBI, or some other big state acronym; to Holocaust deniers and climate change sceptics; to myths and religion. How does Nietzsche’s philosophy help us here? If “truths are illusions that are no longer remembered as being illusions” (257), do we not encounter an amorphous, nihilistic world where nothing is true, or, conversely, a vulgar and vague postmodernism where any claim to truth becomes equally valid? And before all this, is not even such an idea of truth as illusion unfeasible given the famous recursion: you say there is no truth—but is this not itself a truth claim?

If truths *are* illusions—there is no recursion; recursion relies on the possibility of truth without illusion. Which is to say, all truth is anthropocentric, human-centred, sustained through language and images, concepts and formulas. However, here is the crucial point: Nietzsche’s

“Truth and Lie” encounters, surfaces, and upholds the very problem of nothing and everything. Do you feel the horror in this? Yet this is only the negative condition of Nietzsche’s proposition. All is not lost.

Strange events in the night sky, caught on an old 8mm home movie camera. “What the hell is that?” Grainy footage from the past. “Wow”—“Oh my god!” A circle of intense light. Zooming this way then that; flitting from here to there, the disc can barely be confined within the frame. The shape distorts, elongates, it is a flame, now a smear of brightness. Then gone. In voice-over, Curtis tells of UFO sightings in the States during the 1970s. These were, in actual fact, military aircraft experiments, but in order for them to remain secret, disinformation was propagated by the military-industrial complex. Leaked false documentation and loose-lipped lies in bars seeded and encouraged the wildest tales. Area 51. Alien corpses. Out-of-this-world tech. Such deception was known as perception management. How do we affirm that which we now know must be true? All truth may well be an illusion, but there is an asymmetry here: not all illusions are truths.

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Sense 8 and the Praxis of Utopia

I dedicate this essay to all my former and future students taking the three-level Television and Society class in the Department of Communications Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University. You inspire me to think about utopia every time I enter the classroom, and to search for its various, contested, variegated, and complex incarnations in new media environments and in all forms, both new and old, of human communication. You may not know it yet, but you are a sensate cluster.

The 2015-18 Netflix sci-fi TV series *Sense8*, created by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (*The Matrix* (1999), *Cloud Atlas* (2012), and *Jupiter Ascending* (2015)) and J. Michael Straczynski (*Babylon 5* (1994-98)), is a grandiose experiment in the content, style, and form of television. Narratively, *Sense8* intertwines topics of transphobia, identity, intersectionality, violence, poverty, loyalty, love, memory, and orgiastic pleasures, with mushy melodrama, extraordinary fights, car crashes, psychic projections, and reflections on globalization. In terms of style, the show impressionistically crisscrosses various genres: the aesthetics of sci-fi dramas, conspiracy thrillers, Bollywood musicals, police-procedurals, and European films noir coexist throughout the show's twenty-four episodes. The creators admit that certain action scenes were filmed in as many as nine different locations, and then were montaged into a single tableau.¹ The result is multiple worlds—visually haunting, yet revealed in a deliberately slow and painterly manner—worlds meant to represent the magnificent kaleidoscope of human experience bridgeable only through unconditional (almost in the religious sense of the word) love. The opening sequence, for example, attempts to show, in Twitter-trending-style aesthetics, the multiplicity of human geography. This is certainly not accidental, inasmuch as through a grandiose utopian cinematographic gesture the show aims to depict a queer, global, multi-gender, post-national community which is on the one hand deeply immersed in the internet

world of visual cultures and tactile interfaces, while on the other hand, is linked through psychic energy, body to body, and mind to mind, without the mediation of visual or visible technology. The Wachowskis' phantasy for the twenty-first century then, seems to be the assertion that the more digitally linked we become, the closer we get to the moment when one's mind can operate in another person's body. Thus, in the language of Wachowskis' phantasy, being more connected means being less alone. In fact, during a political speech toward the end of the series, one of the main characters, Capheus, summarizes the whole utopian kernel of the series: "Nothing good ever happens when people care more about our differences than the things we share in common. The future I hope for is the same as yours. A future in which our children grow up never knowing love as a wall. But only as a bridge." Indeed, the sensate utopia may be seen, as Alexis Lothian suggests, as "an alternative vision for globalisation" (94) where racial, gender, historical, or systemic injustices could be replaced by a peculiar empathetic bond, one that embraces human diversity, yet resolutely celebrates the full subjectivity of every person.

In terms of form, *Sense8* is a text that dwells in a *trans* universe: trans-gender, trans-genre, trans-subjective, and trans-physical. It is also, inevitably, a transmedia text, inasmuch as *Sense8* engages profoundly in what Jenkins et al. describe as "world building," meaning the creation of augmented narratives with complex, "immersive story worlds" that transcend the boundaries of the show itself (133). Here I refer to a description of transmedia by Jenkins et al.—focused on storytelling in the digital age—that goes beyond the conventional definitions of transmedia as mediations of content across different platforms. Linked to processes of media convergence, Jenkins, Ford, and Green's theories of transmedia emphasize the high levels of audience engagement (that reconfigure the whole entertainment industry by introducing licensing and franchising practices), and point to the increasing demand by audiences for complex, immersive, and extended worlds that in earlier media history could be satisfied only by soap operas (133). In that sense, Jenkins et al. recognized the aesthetics, amounts, and surplus characteristic for "spreadable" rather than "sticky" (134)

1. For the challenges involved in visually creating the world of *Sense8*, see Wachowski, *Creating the World*, 2015 (behind the scenes documentary, minutes 1-15).

media of transmedia storytelling. From my perspective, though, what seems interesting here is how complex transmedia texts such as *Sense8* raise questions of a utopian community, namely questions that are cultural, political, and aesthetic, consistent with issues concerning industry and economic practices.

In terms of form, Sense8 is a text that dwells in a trans universe: trans-gender, trans-genre, trans-subjective, and trans-physical.

Narratively complex shows that thrive in a transmedia environment capitalize on and monetize audiences' attention, emotional labor, and leisure time, and thus often track and profile fan interests. *Sense8*, following that logic, was a giant capitalistic endeavour: a storyline that unfolded on six continents, with a production budget that allowed shooting in the United States, Germany, India, Kenya, Iceland, Mexico, Brazil, South Korea, the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, and Malta.² It seems that the show was also part of Netflix's agenda to enter the global entertainment market as the player with the widest audience base. Perhaps the showrunners' attempts to address a diverse audience worldwide by creating a non-identitarian model for global connection may be considered a utopia doomed to failure, inasmuch as the show fails, in a Marxist key, to interrogate the conditions of its own production and distribution.³ However, precisely in that regard, it is important to ask if *utopia*, understood here as the creation of alternate versions of reality (i.e. multiple and dispersed transmedia worlds that visually and narratively coalesce and deviate constantly), can be reduced to analyses of the industrial media complex along the lines of the Frankfurt school and postcolonial critiques that already inhabit the scarce academic discussions of *Sense8*. The utopian texts are always self-conscious about their playful, illusionary identity, and, in a sense, they are self-ironic, inasmuch as all utopian art masterfully navigates the etymological ambiguity of the word *utopia*, from u-topia (a place that does not exist) to eu-topia (in Thomas Moore's sense, "a

2. The different locations contributed significantly to the show's visual stylistics. See Desowitz, paragraphs 3-4.

3. A Marxist reading of the show that includes a critique leveled against the Wachowskis' failure to create an authentic global imaginary by addressing issues of the fair distribution of resources is developed by Lane-McKinley: "[w]hile mirroring the temporal logics of immediacy and constancy in contemporary capitalism, this dizzying mash-up of global cities also demonstrates the invisibilization of capitalist infrastructure. Where is the sea in this geo-imaginary? Where are the container ships—and where are the wars? Where is the Middle East? The Global South? These lacunae are symptoms" (par. 6).

good place"). Precisely this ambiguity of the concept of utopia is what allows utopian art to combine reason with imagination in multiple eclectic ways to produce worlds that are both uncannily familiar and disturbingly distant.

To put it differently: my main argument is that the show addresses utopia in experimental and novel ways, profiting artistically from the on-demand features of Netflix storytelling, to present an intellectual challenge to a world that is in desperate need of imagining other forms of time, connection, and community. The stakes of this form of utopian imagination are, of course, both aesthetic and political. Utopian texts, such as *Sense8*, confront our current hegemonic and seemingly only way of experiencing the world, by presenting a temporal, aesthetic, and existential challenge to it. These texts carry the utopian passion for what Emilio Ambasz calls "alternative futures" (Sorkin 108), that is, imaginaries that are neither pure illusions (and therefore subject to sublimation as all art is in the classical Freudian reading), nor immediately available, transmissible realities. In that sense, *Sense8* is a peculiar confrontation of the Real—or what I call here *utopia* as *praxis*—inasmuch as it brings the impossible unimaginably closer to us, while still being playfully conscious of the fact that utopias can be both horrific (i.e. *u*-topic) and pleasurable (i.e. *eu*-topic).

The etymological ambiguity of the term utopia is certainly reflected in the multifarious incarnations of the genre in literary, artistic, cinematic, and televisual artifacts, as well as in the proliferation of terminology related to it: anti-utopia, dystopia, and recently computopia (signaling phantasies of computer domination over human agency). While the utopias of the past—Moore's *Utopia* (1516), Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1624), Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), and Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1900)—had the



Utopian texts, such as Sense8, confront our current hegemonic and seemingly only way of experiencing the world, by presenting a temporal, aesthetic, and existential challenge to it.

dual function of reprimanding humanity for its injustice and irrationality and showing that an alternative way ahead was possible, the messages of hope were quickly lost when confronted by the horrors of the two world wars, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The unbridled technological innovations of the twentieth century led to the emergence of the utopian narratives of Fordism, fascism, and communism, which instead of offering visions of a better life, brought quite the opposite, and inspired some of the most influential anti-utopian and dystopian fictions of all time such as Adolf Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1948). In his influential analyses in *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), Karl Popper, appalled by the excesses of technology and modernity, firmly declared "the death of utopia" when defining attempts for its social engineering as the fastest road to totalitarianism (*Open Society* 167-74). While it is true that utopia has thrived in historical periods of profound crisis and transformation—the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Industrial and French Revolutions—as a subversive counter-narrative, it seems that its present being in all of its artistic forms is in crisis (despite the fact that the world today presents ample conditions for utopia's production).⁴ Unlike dystopia,⁵ utopia has always been a particularly difficult genre for film and television makers. Excluding a couple of notable examples in classic cinema (the 1936 adaptation of Wells's *Things to Come*, and the 1937 film adaptation of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*), the images of happy humanity do not seem to translate well to the cinematic medium.

Intellectual reasons for the crisis of utopia are easy to discern: the collapse of reason in the trenches of the world wars and the demystification of all "grand narratives" ushered in a culture of irony, which was profoundly marked by skepticism toward the future. Moreover, the global reign of capitalism seems to have invalidated all other possible alternatives for organizing the social world (along that

4. For a comprehensive historical treatment of the genre of utopia see Kumar (7-18).

5. There are many great dystopias filmed in classical and contemporary cinema and television. Worth mentioning here are the *Metropolis* (1926), the various versions of *1984*, the *Matrix* series (1999 and 2003), and the hit trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015).

line, North Korea or today's excessive versions of Islamic terrorism hardly qualify as enchanting versions of utopia). Let us not forget that utopia deals with comprehensive, exhaustive visions for the world's reorganization. Classical utopias are by default heteronomous: they depict a happy world that is completely impossible and improbable here and now. This world may be a result of the labourious application of rational principles, but it is a world, nonetheless, whose achievement is endlessly postponed. *Sense8*, on the other hand, is a renewed version of utopia. First, it is a rare, successful televisual engagement with the genre of utopia; second, it is an attempt to think about utopia not as a type of pure heteronomy (which is elsewhere, unavailable, external, and subject to multiple representations, and which, in essence, places utopia beyond representation), but rather as a space of autonomy as praxis, that is, a horizon in the making, singular, and yet entirely dependent on the contingency of human agency and imagination, and therefore resistant to domestication; and third, it is a utopia that has not been based on rational thinking (and therefore it is not per se a technocratic, Enlightenment-inspired utopia), but is instead based on sensual connections.

Utopian Community

The show tells the story of eight strangers scattered around the globe who are mentally and emotionally connected after being "birthed" as "sensates" into a trans-subjective cluster by Angelica Turing (Daryl Hannah), their sensate mother figure. Culturally, spiritually, and biographically, the eight main characters could not be more different from each other: a transgender blogger and "hactivist" in San Francisco, struggling with family and societal recognition (Nomi); a compassionate Chicago policeman (Will); an Icelandic DJ with a tragic past living in London (Riley); a closeted Mexican film star, torn between his intimate life as a gay man and his public personification of male machismo (Lito); a Berlin-based petit gangster and lost soul (Wolfgang); a joyful bus driver in Nairobi supporting his AIDS-infected mother (Capheus); a pharmaceutical scientist in Mumbai stuck in an apathetic marriage (Kala); a Korean business woman and underground martial artist in Seoul thrown in jail as a scapegoat for her brother's financial crimes (Sun).

Despite their differences, however, these eight characters constitute a new, more sophisticated type of human being, linked through "psychellium," a psychic nervous system that allows the sensates to share bodily and emotional experiences, as well as to haunt each other's mental landscapes. The eight main characters are being

hunted by a powerful, international multi-government organization, which they confront at the end of season one, and throughout season two, as *one person*. As the showrunner Straczynski explains, the threat the group of sensates presents does not come from a community of radicalized subjects, but rather from a group of radically different individuals capable of acting as *one* (also encoded in a phrase on *Sense8*'s poster, "I am we").⁶ Precisely this interplay between unity and multiplicity, along with the phantasy of instant, pure, unnoisy communication that is at the centre of all reflections about community, is what defines the show's intellectual investments. As John Lessard observes, these are precisely the questions that are important in terms of understanding the mobilization of online communities by transmedia forms of storytelling (3-4).



While utopian communities can rarely be found these days on television, in literature, or film, cyber-utopians believe that they exist on the internet. From Douglass Rushkoff (41-57) to Clay Shirky, a whole branch of techno-utopian scholars trust that the internet has the potential to stage—on a worldwide scale—the citizen-focused public sphere of the Greek polis. Indeed, it seems that the Wachowskis' take on community has some similarities with the techno-utopian project. While in 1999 Neo from *The Matrix* could transcend the menace of Agent Smith by

6. In a 2015 interview for *Creative Screenwriting*, J. Michael Straczynski observed that:

the common coin of our shared humanity trumps whatever they want to throw against us to divide us. We wanted to do a show about connectivity and crossing cultural barriers and how would you react if suddenly there was someone in your head from Nairobi or India, and how would you culturally deal with each other . . . What if you could see that other person as if they were in the same room as you and that person could not only talk to you but you could have access to their memories, their thoughts, their skills? This would allow us to show that it doesn't matter where you come from, you're more alike than you are different (par. 6).

acting alone (since he learned to believe that he was The One), in 2016, the Wachowskis seemed to believe that only together, as participants of an emphatic community, could we encounter and overcome the dangers emanating from mysterious transnational conspiracies. It must be noted, however, that the Wachowskis' enchantment with the internet—revealed through Naomi's spectacular hacker skills—does not transpire so much at the level of the story, as it does at the formal level of cinematography, narrative organization, and progression. After all, even if *Sense8* attempts to project some kind of planetary utopia of connectedness, this projection, as discussed later, sometimes fails. *Sense8*, however, does succeed in playfully engaging ever-distracted internet audiences—sometimes by mimicking the experience of the browsing viewer by way of its disjointed storytelling, and at other times by projecting the connection between the sensates as a type of mental distraction. The utopian community of *Sense8*, then, is one of distracted individuals.

Sense8 is made for internet audiences and peculiarly reproduces in its storytelling the browsing experience of the viewer. Most episodes (particularly in the first season) constantly cut between the lives of the eight main characters, mimicking the split attention of the viewer with a second screen in their hands: checking notifications on a smart device, changing the channel, and in general attending to something else while still watching and engaging with the show. Similarly, the sensates' experiences of each other are represented as a sort of magnificent interruption, almost a mad interference within the flow of quotidian activities.⁷ As the cluster becomes more conscious of its mental talents, the visual and narrative incarnations of the eight-sided psyche become more experimental and risky. They culminate in a couple of eight-member psychic orgies shot on four continents, and artfully montaged together into a one-of-a-kind televisual representation of shared pleasure. In another iconic scene—in episode ten of the first season—amid the sounds of an ecstatic performance of Brendel's Piano Concerto No. 5, Riley's memory of her own birth brings flashbacks of that same existential moment to the other seven members—amniotic fluids, women in labor sweat, birthing pools and swimming pools, rain, the dripping of hospital IV's, and swamps of blood—all metamorphose into a grandiose liquid-inspired metaphor for human connection through pain, achieved via the excess of cinematic images. As Sijia Li thoughtfully concludes: "This is what it looks like to have an orgasmic overload of media, characters, and settings. Not switching between them, but watching them simultaneously—all

7. This is what Lessard defines as "erotics of distraction" via a discussion of Nancy's "inoperative community" in his analysis of *Sense8* (1-2, 9-10).



together, all at once” (par. 5).

Two essential and somewhat conflicting notions emerge here regarding utopia. For the sake of analytical clarity, I will differentiate between them by naming them utopia as *heteronomous community*, and *utopia as autonomous community*.⁸ *Sense8* navigates between these two versions of utopia masterfully, offering, in my view, its own third vision of utopia—a peculiar, hyperlinked combination of both—which I have called praxis. The distinction between heteronomy and autonomy that appears in Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is often derived from the following passage: “If the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere else than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law ... heteronomy always results” (441). While there are different philosophical discussions around the capacity of human agents to act autonomously and heteronomously,⁹ there is a general agreement among Kantian philosophers that autonomy is related to freedom of the will (i.e. acting autonomously is acting according to the laws that the subject has self-legislated), while heteronomy is essentially linked to states of unfreedom (i.e. heteronomy involves acts of submission to external authorities: these could be gods, states, nations, or any kinds of ideologies related to utopias of wealth, eternal life, or racial purity). It is important to note that both heteronomy and autonomy—understood as political, aesthetic, or social principles—have historically produced various models of utopias and social engineering, which, along with the glorification of freedom, have also inflicted the worst instances of enslavement of the human spirit.

Utopia as Heteronomy

This is the kind of utopia which, by twisting Habermas’s “ideal speech situation,” can be defined as a non-coercive

8. I use the terms *autonomy* (a space of freedom) and *heteronomy* (a space of submission), as they are famously defined in Kantian ethics (52-67).

9. For comprehensive discussions of the concepts of autonomy and heteronomy, see Korsgaard (1996, 3-43) and Allison (2011, 13-71).

form of connection governed by empathetic bonds rather than rational consensus (43-115). The danger, of course, is that regardless of whether the organizing principle of community is reason or feeling, its exclusivity and singular authority runs the risk of turning this connection into a dogmatic structure, a heteronomy. Whatever emancipating and non-oppressive radical kernel of pure empathy a social system may have, precisely because its foundation is a closed singularity, it is always susceptible to becoming the worst type of exclusive identity. Think about the historical violence of race, empires, nations, and capital: why should the logic of the *cluster* be different? In the second season of *Sense8*, for example, we encounter other clusters of connected individuals who are militaristic, manipulative, and hostile toward the main protagonists.

More importantly, it is precisely the other clusters that have betrayed the radical revolutionary project of empathy by entering into power wars and collaborating with conspiratorial structures. Even inside the community of eight, extreme empathy is never problematized. As Sijia Li notes, the show misses the opportunity to ask a whole set of questions about difference and connection that are foundational to the series’ aspirations to address them, not only in an aesthetic key, but also as issues of social communication (par. 14). What if the cluster had to deal with a member who is unworthy of empathy, a racist or a homophobe, a person of no extraordinary skill, or without an exciting backstory? While it is inspiring to be drawn into the visually haunting worlds of the main characters, one should not forget that they are constructed as superheroes, in the sense that there is some kind of excess that defines who they are. Is empathy, then, reserved only for those who are already somehow alike, or is it possible for its boundaries to be endlessly stretched? Nonetheless, *Sense8* seems somewhat aware of these shortcomings in its narrative: in a self-ironizing gesture in season one, episode 9 (minutes 14-16), we are warned that love inside the cluster, which is characterized by commitment and care beyond imagination, is the worst kind of narcissism. Even superior human beings, then, cannot escape the hubristic vanity of love—the almost divine drive towards total, unconditional, sacrificial love. The series proposes that what makes us “all too human” is the fact that we are not capable of precisely this type of absolute borderless love.

On the other hand, the sensates’ heteronomous community can be understood through an analogy of Bataille’s descriptions of the community of lovers and the paradoxes it contains.¹⁰ The community of lovers has a closed and elective character, but it is also excluded from the world of exploitative economic production and

10. For a comprehensive comment on Bataille’s works in English, see Mitchell and Kemp Winfree (1-17).

instrumental exchange; the community of lovers is thus defined by the intensity of contact locked in the orgasm, the laughter, and the shared tears. For Bataille, the ecstasy of fusion, which is anarchic and formless, yet productive of an existence not marked by possession, should be the real political principle of community. The ecstatic moments of togetherness that Bataille identifies—laughter, orgasm, and tears—allow us to be suspended with others in a non-identitarian, incalculable bond. These moments of fusion are also moments of peculiar utopian sacredness, inasmuch as they are outside time, outside the logic of production, and yet profoundly marked by an obsessive desire for connection with an outside; they are a drive toward the other, understood as someone or something different from the hegemonic social order and the hegemonic social time that discipline us right here and right now.

The series proposes that what makes us “all too human” is the fact that we are not capable of precisely this type of absolute borderless love.

At the same time, the whole concept of the cluster can be interpreted, of course, as a playful wink toward the type of online, on-demand television that Netflix creates. The omnipresent, omnidirectional choice of television content (or, in fact, *any content*), on any device and at any time, presents us with multiple chances to learn about the magnificent, marvelous, and endlessly diverse human world. If *Sense8* is an exercise in the creation of mesmerizing cinematic images for television, then its creators also seem to believe in the power of these images to educate: the homosexual sex is beautiful (Lito); transgender people are intelligent, educated, and loving (Nomi); a promiscuous German petit gangster and a righteous, pious Indian scientist can fall in love (Wolfgang and Kala); sons might kill their fathers and have no remorse (Wolfgang and Joong-Ki, Sun’s brother, are similar yet morally different characters inasmuch as the cluster love is what substitutes the monstrosity of Wolfgang with an oriole of saint-like, gloomy darkness); women can take pleasure in fighting while still being sensitive and vulnerable (Sun); bus drivers might run for political office (Capheus); black men in Nairobi may idolize white Hollywood stars like Jean-Claude Van Damme (Capheus and his friend); a perfectly ordinary Chicago policeman can fall maddeningly for a liminal outsider: the doleful, drug-consuming, blue-haired DJ from Iceland (Will and Riley). But are we in fact being shown characters who are truly global? Are they an authentic representation



of the breadth of human diversity? In its noble effort to place empathy at the centre of human nature, the *Sense8* utopia seems to fail to account for its shortcomings. In that sense, the aspiration to give shape, form, and voice to human multiplicity is a gargantuan and hubristic task doomed to failure. Interesting and gorgeous in multiple and bizarre ways, the *Sense8* characters come close to the internet audiences that follow their trials on Netflix: in an overload of televisual content, we tend to choose a safe type of diversity. Algorithmically clustered by Netflix as possible audiences for the *Sense8* series, we, like the main protagonists, choose to navigate inside a bubble of already well-calculated empathetic bonds. As *Sense8* was unable to continue into a third season because its algorithms failed to secure a wide enough bubble, this comparison perhaps suggests that these algorithmic communities—that is, communities that emerge through calculation—are built on shaky ground.

Utopia as Autonomy

On the other hand, *Sense8* complicates its own suggestion of failed utopia in a way that is not immediately obvious. Telepathic empathy is experienced by the sensates only in moments of the quotidian flow’s extreme rupture. Thus, true *presence*—the moments of intense intimacy, like the telepathic orgies, or just the moments of shared togetherness—is conceptualized as an exodus from the normative brutality of the available physical world. Utopia as autonomy, then, functions not as a desperate attempt to hold onto a particular racial, gender, economic, or national identity, but rather as an ecstatic, erotic, and pleasurable exit from these identities. More importantly, the logic of identity itself is replaced by an openness toward the other as a naked human being, irreducible to any worldly—socio-cultural, economic, and political—characteristics. In that regard, the critique that *Sense8*’s world is falsely global, as far as it offers a selective or clichéd rep-

resentation of difference, is pointless. *Sense8*'s goal is not to reproduce its clichés naively—and some clichés such as the representation of Africa via the AIDS and tribal divisions without reference to colonialism may be difficult to stomach—but to undermine altogether their ontological significance. A real alternative to the oppressive world of boundaries—those drawn across history, race, gender, and capital—is the process of making these boundaries meaningless.

Utopia as autonomy, then, functions not as a desperate attempt to hold onto a particular racial, gender, economic, or national identity, but rather as an ecstatic, erotic, and pleasurable exit from these identities.

Traditional communities built around identity politics are coercive and obsessed with difference as a divisive force. However, communities built around the pleasures of interruption, distraction, and ecstatic, allocentric connection are open to the world (they even constitute a world) in ways that may be foundational for a new political community ontology. Autonomy, therefore, emerges only through an ultra-sensual empathetic connection, a kind of ecstatic leap beyond the historical and cultural coordinates that ground traditional communities. As John Lesard notes, "*Sense8* not only problematizes a metaphysics of subjectivity and the correlative logics of containment, intentionality, and self-identity, but also espouses the possibility and desirability of remaining open, 'exposed,' to the distractions of alterity, which is to say, the opening, rupture, or interruption posed by manifold singularities" (11).

Utopia as Praxis

What makes *Sense8* a unique text in the genre of utopia is that it switches playfully and subversively between the heteronomous and autonomous modes of utopian thinking about community, time, and space, thus expanding the world that is available to us. While questions of identity remain central to the text, *Sense8* suggests that our reality, including the realities of our closed identity bubbles, is only one possible outcome of complex and different encounters open to infinite configurations. Eight strangers acting as one, then, is just a metaphor for eighty, eight hundred, or an infinite multitude of

infinitely different people prepared to make a sublime leap outside the boundaries of their limited worlds toward freedom, equality, brotherhood, and love. The utopian dimension shines through here: universal emancipation comes through empathy, and it is no less eventful than other kinds of revolutionary hope, particularly in light of the failure of other historical utopias. Precisely this act of destabilizing the world as it is, by rendering it fragile, contingent, and somehow less-present, in favour of a world that *might be but is not yet*, is what makes *Sense8* a revolutionary text. But there is more to this aspiration: the empathetic encounters that the sensates experience may be seen not simply as quotidian disruptions but rather as complex ethical ruptures in the realm of the Other. These encounters are *u*-topian, inasmuch as they are singular: there is no place or identity that holds them or defines them prior to their emergence, and for that reason, there is no available place here and now to receive and bear them. On the one hand, the sensates' encounters reveal existence to be open and contingent: the world we live in is not the only possible world, and therefore the future is not necessarily predictable, knowable, or calculable. On the other hand, *Sense8* brings us unimaginably closer to the promise of *eu*-topia, that is, in its infinite optimism—including its belief in the capacity of streaming television to educate audiences in the praxis of love—the show invites the viewer to gamble her security in favor of her extraordinary power to act.

Finally, *Sense8*, understood as a text that depicts the dreams, desires, and utopias of community and time, is also a colossal attempt at imagining alternative temporalities. The rapturous encounters, the telepathic orgies, and the adventurous breaks into somebody else's timeline, carry meaning, not only as an escape from the world, but also as a bridge between the short *now*—defined by desires for immediate gratification through consumption, and climaxed in the profound crisis of our human capacity to postpone desire, to imagine and long for things and people that are not easily or immediately achievable—and the *longue durée* ('long time') of any dream awaiting its historical embodiment. Perhaps the strongest utopian feature of *Sense8* then is that it playfully subverts notions of *now* and *not now*, *here*, and *not here*, by bringing them close to us, and yet distancing them by presenting them as pure phantasy. This playfulness and drive toward unblocking the temporal imagination, an essential genre characteristic of utopia, is what places the text of *Sense8* among the utopic fictions that are not only critical of our present, but also care greatly about whatever shared future is in front of us.

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Film Phenomenology and the “Eloquent Gestures” of Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival*

Now, more than ever, we live in what Lev Manovich referred to as the “society of the screen” (99). Once primarily used to—quite literally—frame work and leisure time, screens have become increasingly pervasive in all aspects of life. Dynamic screens hail our attention from billboards and bus stops, nudging toward those interactive projections of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Minority Report* (2002). The domestic space offers no respite as screens litter the surfaces of the home: attached to walls and refrigerators, scattered on tables and sofas, a multitude of screens of all sizes beckon our attention. In response to the omnipresence of the screen—and its resulting in both digital and physical clutter—screen designers are increasingly concerned with reducing the screen’s “interruption.” A recently released Samsung television, for instance, is simply called *The Frame*, and its selling point is its “art mode” that transforms the television into a work of art when it is not in use. “The idea for me,” explains its designer, Yves Béhar, was to “integrate technology into people’s lives that’s non-disruptive, so that it falls into the background” (qtd. in Stinson, par. 5), while elsewhere he says that *The Frame* “is more about technology being invisible” (qtd. in White, par. 13).

The way that Béhar envisions an “invisible” technological landscape that “falls into the background,” seamlessly integrated with its user’s life, evokes Vivian Sobchack’s recent description of the “screen-sphere,” referencing the “ubiquity, multiplicity, and connectivity of the screens around us” (“Screen-Scape” 165). The network of devices that comprises the screen-sphere demands a new form of phenomenological engagement from its user, one that has radical implications for the formation and experience of identity. As Sobchack claims, “we live today primarily *in* and *through* screens, rather than merely *on* or *with* them. They no longer mediate our knowledge of the world, ourselves, and

others; beyond representation, they have now become the primary means by which our very ‘being’ is affirmed” (158). Not only limited to selfies that offer a filtered (self-)perception to others through *social media*, screens are now completely integrated with the body in what could be described as *biological media*. The Apple Watch, for instance, presses against the skin to record steps, monitor pulse, sense the rhythms of sleep, and even has a function that reminds its wearer to “breathe.”

On the one hand, the screen-sphere promotes greater interactivity between users, technology, and other people. Yet on the other hand (to use a carefully chosen metaphor), the screen-sphere is tinged with concerns that despite fostering enhanced connectivity in *virtual space*, we may be losing touch with the *material ground* of identity and intersubjective communication. In this essay, I put Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language and intersubjective experience in dialogue with Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016). As Sobchack describes, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a sustained investigation into “the sensuous contours of language, with meaning and its signification born not abstractly but concretely from the surface contact, the fleshly dialogue, of human beings and the world together making sense sensible” (*Address* 3). In the first section of this essay, I gloss Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language, in particular his claims that our capacity for intersubjective communication through speech and gesture is always grounded in the lived experience of the perceptive and expressive body. Then, I test Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological thought in a handling of the “sensuous contours of language” as they are expressed in—and mediated through—Villeneuve’s *Arrival*. I suggest that the film is not only narratively about (mis)communication between human and alien forms of language, but further, I argue that *Arrival* is self-reflexive of film as a sensuous event. The multiplicity of screens in its mise-

en-scène not only provides a vivid illustration of the screen-sphere, but also, through *Arrival's* appeal to the sensorium, it serves as a vital reminder that film language necessitates an intersubjective and embodied “fleshly dialogue” between the spectator and the screen.

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By referring to how conscious experience of the world is always existentially—and materially—embodied in the flesh, enacted through an existential structure of intentionality that correlates acts of consciousness with its object, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that our understanding of the world hinges on the experience of the lived-body. The lived-body is simultaneously both a subject *in* the world and an object *for* the world. That is, not only is the lived-body capable of perception but also it is “our expression in the world, [and is] the visible form of our intentions ... an active body capable of gestures, of expression, and finally of language” (Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy* 5, 7). The lived-body’s *intrasubjective commutation* of perception and expression therefore forms the material grounds for *intersubjective communication*. As Sobchack explains, the “lived-body projects and performs its perceptual perspective and situation and bears meaning into the world as the expression of that situation. The highest level of this performance is *speech* and its fixation as *writing*” (*Address* 41).



Speech, John O’Neil claims, “is the invocation of our own being in concert with others,” and he explains that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of speech is “a phi-

losophy of initiative, of style and gratuity accomplished against the limits of received language” (xxx). That is, speech springs from language as it is institutionalised into the syntactical rules that govern its use. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, understanding speech is not just a matter of “[consulting] some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving,” but rather “[we] lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures” (*Signs* 42). Language’s “eloquent gesture” testifies to its material origins in the perceptive and expressive lived-body. The term itself reveals that language is not only acoustically heard but also is synaesthetically felt, such as when we describe the textures of the voice (e.g. a “sharp” tone). Indeed, the way that comprehension involves the full sensorium is reflected in the way that the Latin root for ‘comprehension’—*prehendere*—means ‘to seize.’ For Merleau-Ponty, conversations are intersubjective events in which “I project myself into the other person” and vice versa, so much so that it “resembles a struggle between two athletes in a tug-of-war” (*Prose* 19).

Although he is describing spoken dialogue, his metaphoric description of the muscular dimension of interpersonal communication evokes the eloquence of bodily gesture. Throughout his phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty describes the significance of physical gesture as an expression of conscious experience: what he terms the “first language” (*Primacy* 8). When we see someone express their perception through gesture, such as rapidly twisting their neck to look in a different direction, their gesture is inhabitable because we can similarly re-orientate the body and signal our shift in intentional direction to other people. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “I do not understand others by some act of intellectual interpretation ... I join it in a kind of blind recognition which precedes the intellectual working out and clarification of the meaning ... It is through my body that I understand people” (*Phenomenology* 216). Of course, we do (usually) come to understand other people intellectually, but Merleau-Ponty attests that the body has a pre-reflective capacity for gestural comprehension that forms the carnal grounds of intersubjective experience. Describing the lived dimensions of “carnal intersubjectivity,” Richard McCleary writes that “flesh meets flesh in the flesh of the world, and man [becomes] a living mirror for his fellow man ... A mirror full of moving shadows; for even though a world which can arise from carnal gestures is a ‘magic’ one, the wondrous creatures of our vision always drag along reluctant flesh” (xviii).

I have given a thorough description of language as a “magic machine for transporting the ‘I’ into the other

person's perspective" because Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the incarnated grounds of sense-making and capacity for language has been influential in film studies (*Prose* 19). And, after all, what else is the cinema but a "magic machine" that is empowered to transport us into another person's perspective, or "a living mirror ... full of moving shadows"? For the rest of this essay, then, I offer Villeneuve's *Arrival* as a case study that illuminates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of intersubjective communication, as the film is a meditation on the reversible structure of language and perception. Indeed, as I describe below, the film proposes that inhabiting a different language can change the way in which we perceive and inhabit the sensible world itself. Further, a phenomenological analysis of the film reveals how the spectator is drawn into a carnal dialogue with the material texture of the screen, a shared space that fosters intersubjective understanding.

Arrival opens with a series of vignettes portraying Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams) interacting with her daughter as she is born, her growth into a plucky adolescent, and her tragic death from cancer. Along with their golden and sepia tones, Louise's voice-over establishes these vignettes as memories, albeit with the warning that "memory doesn't work the way I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order." Louise is a professor of linguistics and her skills as a translator are required to determine an alien race's intentions when twelve spacecraft position themselves around the world. The aliens (named "heptapods" for their seven legs) "speak" through incomprehensible groans and vibrations; however, Louise discovers that they also communicate through a vibrant visual language. Through their trunk-like legs, the heptapods weave great circular patterns that shimmer in the air like smoke. Unlike the linear connections of graphemes and morphemes, the heptapod's logograms are circular and continuous. As Dr. Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) explains, their "logograms are not bound by time ... their language has no forward or backward," prompting the scientists to question, "is this



how they think?"

The film references the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that posits that language not only functions as a mechanical means of expressing thought but also structures thought and perception. Glossing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, linguist Basil Hussein explains that language "determines how [we] perceive and organize ... both the natural world and the social world" and that language "defines your experience for you ... [it] is neutral but gets in the way, imposing habits of both looking and thinking" (644). The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis offers a rebuttal to Merleau-Ponty's claims regarding the impossibility of a perfect translation of language. "We may speak several languages," he suggests, "but one of them always remains the one in which we live ... to [completely] assimilate a language, it would be necessary to make the world which expresses one's own, and one never does belong to two worlds at once" (*Phenomenology* 218). However, Louise does begin to "belong to two worlds at once" and, as she becomes fluent in Heptapod, her perception of the world—and time—changes. Rather than remaining on a linear plane, Louise begins to experience time as a simultaneous structure that blurs the past, present, and future. Indeed, the spectator shares her disorientation as the film weaves subjective imagery into the diegesis and is frequently filmed in swooping, circular camerawork that mimics the film's cyclical narrative structure. The film's major conceit reveals that the "memories" that opened the film are fragments from Louise's future, a future that she embraces despite knowing the impending tragedy that awaits.

Arrival is based on Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," a philosophical short story about free will and determinism that goes into more detail about how language structures experience. "The physical universe [is] a language with a perfectly ambiguous grammar" itself, muses Louise, and that "[every] physical event was an utterance that could be parsed in two entirely different ways" depending on whether it was grasped by a "sequential" or "simultaneous" mode of awareness (Chiang 133-34). Louise reflects that the heptapods' "simultaneous" mode of conscious awareness meant that speech's linearity creates "a bottleneck," and so that rather than similarly "[constraining] writing with a glottographic straitjacket ... [logograms] naturally took advantage of the page's two-dimensionality" (Chiang 135). Rather than writing in linear sentences, logograms map complex thoughts into individual shapes that are immediately perceived.

Crucially, the novel explains that the heptapods' language is performative. The heptapods have a different awareness of time because "[instead] of using language to inform, they used language to actualize" (Chiang 138).

Human speech is performative too, of course. Judith Butler, for instance, argues that a performative speech act is a “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,” its power constructed through a “ritualized production, a ritual reiterated” and circulated throughout culture (13, 95). However, here I want to emphasise not only how language is discursively *performative*, but how *Arrival* visibly, audibly, and materially *performs* the heptapods’ seemingly incomprehensible language itself.

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Early in the film, Louise gives a lecture on the sonic anomalies of Portuguese, explaining that the language originated in the Kingdom of Galicia where “language was seen as an expression of art.” In doing so, *Arrival* foreshadows how the spectacular logograms of Heptapod resemble works of art because they form ephemeral Rorschach patterns that hang in the air. The moment that the heptapods first perform their visual language is filmed in a long shot: the logogram blooms in the air before fully materialising in centre frame. The camera then cuts to the astonished faces of the scientists who gawp at the spectacle. Fittingly, the shot then cuts to a camera that is recording the display as Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker) asks his technician, “are you getting this?” But he could be speaking directly to the spectator: the shot is doubly framed by the cinema screen and the diegetic visual technology, and the visually stunning language commands the spectator to look on in wonder. As if responding to the spectator’s desire (and the scientists’) to get a closer look, the shot cuts to an extreme close-up. The camera crawls down a section of the logogram, capturing its materiality that is reminiscent of black smoke or squid ink that is suspended in still water.

Additionally, the logograms are accented by sound. The film’s sound editor Sylvain Bellemare explains that the sounds of the otherworldly logograms were made by the very domestic sounds of vegetables that were dropped in water, dried rice, and metal brushes being scratched across plastic boards (qtd. in Walden, par. 17). However, while the heptapods’ visual language is certainly—and literally—foregrounded, it is not the only way that *Arrival* performs the aliens’ language because the heptapods have a sonically resonant form of speech.

Similar to the prosaic sounds that accompanied the aliens’ visual language, the heptapods’ speech was crafted by sampling and layering a range of natural noises: camels, pigs, birds, and a traditional Māori flute (Bellemare qtd. in Walden, par. 20). Elsewhere, Bellemare describes that the heptapods needed to sound organic, “a bit like whales [or] a subaquatic creature. That was a goal, to make them as a living beast, [perceived] at a very low frequency” (qtd. in Grobar, par. 11). When sound is transmitted at low frequency, it is not only acoustically heard but also viscerally felt. Here, I return to Merleau-Ponty because, as he demonstrates in his description of the way that acoustic texture facilitates intersubjective understanding, “the conversation pronounces itself within me, it summons me and grips me; it envelops and inhabits me to the point that I cannot tell what comes from me and what from it” (*Prose* 19). Therefore, although the specific translation of the heptapods’ speech might go over our heads, its meaning, which alerts us to the awesome power of the alien beings, is felt from within.



Arrival also evokes Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the eloquence of gesture. When Weber recruits Louise, he attempts to convince her to translate a few moments of the heptapods’ rustling language, but she tells him that “it is impossible to translate from an audio file” alone, and that she would “need to be there to interact with them.” This hypothesis is confirmed later when the characters are in the field and have their first interactions with the heptapods in the cavernous antechamber of the spacecraft. In addition to a large opaque screen that separates the humans from the aliens, the scientists are distanced from the aliens and the viewers because they wear heavy protective gear that disguises their bodies and faces (at times the spectator is offered a subjective point-of-view shot that shows how the mask obscures Louise’s vision). Louise realises that the research team’s translation sessions will not progress if she is distanced from the aliens because, as she says, “they need to see me.” For this

reason, she acts against orders by removing her protective gear and approaching the screen. Louise presses her hand against the screen and, mirroring her movement, one of the aliens presses one of its appendages against the glass.



Thus, the film comments on the importance of gestural communication (perhaps further enhanced by the way that the heptapods resemble hands), something that has perhaps been lost in our increasing contact with other people through the screen-sphere. Although mobile devices invite us to caress their smooth surfaces, and social media platforms like Instagram and Tinder allow us to interact with others by double-tapping or swiping our fingers across digital skin, the screen-sphere diminishes the value of body language. As Merleau-Ponty explains, gestural communication and comprehension hinge on “the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others ... It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his. [A gesture] outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it” (*Phenomenology* 215). *Arrival* gives an exaggerated illustration of this when the heptapods tap on the glass barrier and Louise realises that they want her to write a logogram on the screen between them. She places her hands on the screen at the same spot as the heptapod and it emits a vast cloud of its “ink” that swirls between them. Louise says that she cannot write “with both hands” and takes one away. At this moment, the heptapod bangs on the screen; the heavy knock blends into the deep vibrating groan of the heptapods’ speech that resonates through the air and the body. Louise is profoundly affected and, in a trance, she closes her eyes and is pulled into one of her “memories” (touching and caressing her infant daughter). Opening her eyes, Louise and the heptapod slowly—and in a symmetrical curve—move their hands on the screen to craft a circular logogram together. In this powerful moment, Louise’s body seems to “adjust... and overlap” the heptapods’ intentionality, and their bodies come together in a moment of expressive meaning-making.

In sum, *Arrival* visibly, audibly, and kinetically performs the specific language of the heptapods. However, the film’s value not only lies in the film’s philosophical meditation on language and how it structures perception. Rather, *Arrival*’s power lies in how it mediates its philosophy to the spectator in an intersubjective and synaesthetic experience. Indeed, the self-reflexivity of the film did not go unnoticed by critics. Manohla Dargis describes the space for the language performance as “a type of stage, an immersive theatre that engages sight, sound, and a sense of touch” (C1). But further, the moment in which Louise and the heptapods “adjust ... and overlap” one another—mediated through a screen—is analogous to the general relationship between the spectator and the cinematic screen. Sobchack explains that the screen-sphere radically challenges the notion of the singular and rectangular screen placed before the spectator and destabilises “the fixed position and physical passivity initially associated with watching cinema ... from a distance and sitting down” (“Screen-Scape” 157). But challenging the idea of a fixed and physically passive spectator has been a central claim of phenomenological film theory as “the film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression. It entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically” (Sobchack *Address* 9). Therefore, just as in the novella, the heptapods’ logograms “[take] advantage of the page’s two-dimensionality” (Chiang 135), *Arrival* takes advantage of the screen’s materiality, employing the modes of embodied experience to invite the spectator to inhabit a multi-dimensional space.

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Just as Louise’s experience of the world is shaped as she begins to comprehend the heptapods’ language, the film’s body attunes us to Louise’s experience, fostering intersubjective understanding. A clear—and common—example is when the film’s body adjusts itself to the intentional behaviour of screen characters, because visually aligning spectators with a character’s point of view further invites engagement. This is particularly important



in *Arrival*, as Adams's performance is purposefully pallid, her facial expressions illegible. However, the film's body can adopt her visual perspective to more squarely put us in her shoes. Indeed, *Arrival* offers not only material instances of Louise's vision but also offers moments of her "inner sight" and imagination, as dream and memory texture her experience. The film weaves Louise's "memories" (rendered quite literally "warm and fuzzy" through their sepia tone and intimate cinematography) with the antiseptic brightness of the present. Indeed, the timelines become increasingly confused—dream interrupting reality, future converging with the present—until the spectator necessarily shares Louise's disorientation.

Screen narratives do not only "focalise" around a character's visual experience, despite the term's association with vision. Acoustic experience also plays an important part, such as the sounds of Louise's breathing when she is wearing her protective suit. Gripped with nerves about her first meeting with the alien creatures, Louise takes a rapid series of shallow breaths until she almost hyperventilates. The sound of her breath has been transformed by her radio equipment so that it sounds sharp and metallic. Occasionally the camera adopts her visual perspective as she peers through a mask that obscures her view; however, the camera holds her anxious face in close-up for most of the sequence. However, the sounds of Louise's ragged breathing continue to fill the soundscape from all speaker channels, giving the effect

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that the spectator has been positioned *inside* her suit. Therefore, although the camera might be able to escape the confines of her suit, the soundscape ensures that the spectator remains trapped inside along with Louise and feels her claustrophobia and anxiety.

Describing the sounds of Louise's breaths as "sharp and metallic" further testifies to *Arrival's* appeal not only to the eye and ear but also the skin and guts. So too does this resonate with the description of Louise's subjective imagery as "warm and fuzzy." These images are shot in rich yellow and orange tones that gives the impression that they have been lit by a glowing fire, but they also often remain indistinct, inviting the eye to graze across the image and to probe it for clarity. In addition to how the low-frequency sounds of the heptapods' speech is viscerally perceived in the stomach, *Arrival* uses other techniques to kinetically affect the spectator. For instance, when Louise arrives at the military base in a helicopter, she looks outside the window to get her first glimpse of the spacecraft. The shot is undeniably impressive: the ovular vessel—a slim onyx egg—floats in a field surrounded by mountains as a thick plume of cloud or fog cascades down a mountainous ridge and lightly pools on the grass below. Jóhann Jóhannsson's score punctuates this visually stunning shot with what sounds like an orchestra of out-of-tune bagpipes, lending an unsettling sense of dread. This effect is compounded by the way that the camera swoops around the camp before lowering down to the ground. Although the camera movement is fluid, its circular movement—combined with Jóhannsson's dissonant score—is dizzying and reflects Louise's overwhelmed frame of mind.

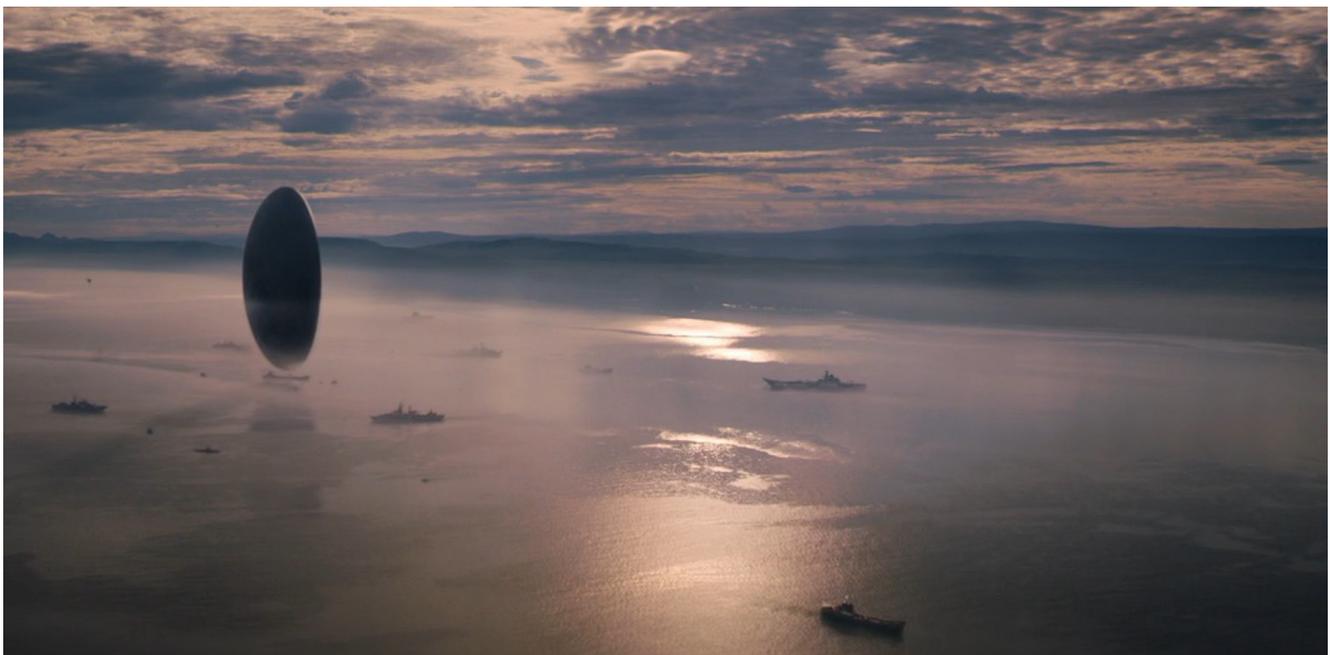
Film theorist Tarja Laine has usefully examined the affective dynamics of screen spectatorship, and posits the film experience as a corporeal entanglement, a "halfway meeting" between the spectator and screen in which "both parties must 'exit themselves' to come into contact with each other" (161). As Laine goes on to describe, "spectators must exit their life-world, while the film exists outside the realm of representation, both becoming co-participants in the sensuous event [of] cinema" because comprehension "does not come from observing films at a distance, but rather from direct, bodily engagement with them" (161). Just as Louise cannot understand the heptapods by merely observing them, comprehending *Arrival* is certainly impoverished if we do not consider the synaesthetic richness of its aesthetic structure and how it entangles the spectator.

The screen-sphere offers a dynamic space for new connections between users and the screen itself. But although we are increasingly becoming plugged in—and perhaps turned on—by these new potentialities, we

must not lose sight of the lived experience of the body as the grounds of comprehension in both communication and new media entanglements. This essay has argued that *Arrival* provides an apposite illustration of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of the material grounds of language in the lived-body. Indeed, the film quite literally illustrates how "the wondrous creatures of our vision always drag along reluctant flesh" (McCleary xviii), as we make sense of the heptapods' language—and the film itself—through the sense-making capacity of the body. *Arrival* might narratively concern the arrival of alien life. However, attending to the film's affective-aesthetic structure returns the spectator to their senses and how it feels—and what it means—to be materially alive, and the importance of sensuous contact with others here on earth.

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The *I* in Object: Selfie Culture and Object-Oriented Philosophy

The emerging concept of a selfie culture necessitates the development of a critical media theory that provides ontological attention to the selfie as a larger cultural phenomenon. While in popular media the selfie has typically been treated as a novel form of self-representation, what has been less recognized is the selfie's profound impact on contemporary visual culture. Since 2010 and the invention of the forward-facing camera on the iPhone 4, visual culture has become increasingly saturated with a variety of reflective photo and video technologies. Whether referring to Skype, FaceTime, or the selfie per se, in the selfie's visual culture our experience is frequently mediated by a heightened state of self-awareness or what popular media has diagnosed as exacerbated narcissism. And yet, in spite of a desire to link the selfie to the concept of narcissism, the philosophical implications of this link have been underdeveloped. At the moment, there seems to be a reticence or even an inability to apply the methodology necessary to accurately assess the selfie's relationship to narcissism, namely psychoanalysis, given its diminishing status in the past half-century. In film studies, psychoanalytic theory began waning beginning in the 1990s as new scholarship increasingly turned instead toward film phenomenology and affect theory's methodologies. As this essay will suggest, however, the selfie's narcissism need not be explicated via a naïve return to Freud, since in fact, the most radical implications of narcissism's theorization are being suggested by the wholly contemporary movement of object-oriented philosophy (OOP hereafter). OOP's claims are useful as a diagnostic tool for examining modes of being such as selfie culture's object-oriented subjectivity, which de-prioritizes external relations and is instead preoccupied with self-relation—that is, the affective experience of oneself as image and as object. Similar to selfie culture, OOP registers a change in sentiment toward the condition of objecthood or,

more specifically for our purposes, toward the thinking of the self, or the subject, as object.

As a branch of speculative realism, OOP emerged somewhat organically from a series of blogged conversations and debates shared by young, contemporary philosophers that most notably included Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost (Bryant et al. 1-18). Similar to speculative realism, OOP rejects the anti-realism of post-structuralist and postmodern philosophy, more summarily referred to as “the linguistic turn,” which acknowledges human thought as a proper, structural limit (2-5). In response to twenty-first-century developments such as global climate change and the increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and technology, speculative realism rejects the notion that the subject-object, or human-world binary, which philosopher Quentin Meillassoux deems *correlationism*, should strictly delimit philosophical speculation (3). As Meillassoux states, speculative realism rejects “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (3). What distinguishes object-oriented philosophy from speculative realism more generally, however, is its investment in the integrity of objects and its refusal, unlike other philosophers of becoming such as Bergson, Whitehead, or Deleuze, to reduce objects to their relations (9). Instead, in formulating OOP, Harman, and later Bryant, Bogost, and their followers, were inspired by the implications of Heidegger's tool-analysis, maintaining that there is a withdrawn dimension to any object that exceeds its relations and remains integral despite them (8). To explain this fundamental premise, Harman develops a taxonomy of the quadruple object, which postulates that any given object is divided between its sensuous or manifest qualities and a real or withdrawn dimension (Harman 69-81).

Interestingly, while Levi Bryant recognizes that

OOP's split object is not unlike the split subject of psychoanalysis, divided between the withdrawn unconscious and the apparent ego (Bryant 281), Harman analogizes his concept of the object to the Freudian dream, which is divided between the latent and manifest (read: real and sensuous). Furthermore, in the concluding passages of *The Quadruple Object*, Harman explicitly links his metaphysics of object relations to Freudian psychoanalysis as metaphysics of consciousness (Harman 143). Similarly, Levi Bryant was trained as a psychoanalyst, identifies as a "resolute Lacanian," and in *The Democracy of Objects* utilizes Lacan's graphs of sexuation as a model for contrasting anti-realist and realist ontologies in the explication of his philosophy of object-relations, which he has deemed *onticology* (Bryant ix, 20). However, the indebtedness of OOP's theory of the object to the psychoanalytic theory of the subject remains implicit.

Similar to selfie culture, OOP registers a change in sentiment toward the condition of objecthood or, more specifically for our purposes, toward the thinking of the self, or the subject, as object.

According to OOP, psychoanalysis as a theory of human subjectivity can only represent a sub-category of a more macroscopic system. However, more practically, the logic of object relations as elaborated in OOP draws primarily on the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism, and in so doing, establishes a new and more radical extension of the narcissistic relation that curiously echoes the contemporary salience of self-reflective technologies in today's selfie culture. However, neither Harman nor Bryant admit that the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism is an influence on their theories. While Harman's *The Quadruple Object* overlooks addressing narcissism, Bryant addresses it in conjunction with his rejection of human exceptionality, analogizing the correlationism of the linguistic turn to a form of narcissism, which over-emphasizes the human dimensions of being: language, culture, mortality, and so on, at the expense of objects (Bryant 257-58). However, Bryant does not acknowledge that narcissism is a foundational idea within OOP, yet this relationship becomes apparent if we consider OOP's emphasis on the impossibility of true object relations.

As formulated in Freudian psychoanalysis, a certain amount of narcissism is normal, even necessary, in the formation of the ego. Although Freud's theory of narcissism

became more nuanced over time, in his 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction," he viewed the libido as divided between ego and object libido, arguing that a healthy individual develops toward an outward-directed object libido with sexual maturation (Freud 67-102). Although Freud viewed the small child as generally narcissistic, in some cases this narcissism pathologically persists into adulthood at the cost of forming proper object relations. However, Freud also observes that pathological narcissism makes one impervious to analysis, due to the resulting impossibility for establishing proper object relation with the analyst (i.e. transference). In fact, Freud links pathological narcissism to the condition of schizophrenia, in which the individual lacks adequate object relations to the outside world. For this reason, people with schizophrenia were likewise considered psychoanalytically untreatable. Moreover, Freud argued that ego libido exists in an inverse relation to object libido. The establishment of the ego is a necessary precondition for the establishment of object relations in the maturation of the healthy individual. Freud attests to this by differentiating between two phases of narcissism: primary and secondary. In the case of secondary narcissism, in which the ego is already established, the subject's ego libido is rewarded no longer strictly through self-relation but through identification with others as ego ideals (Freud 67-102; LaPlanche and Pontalis 255-57).

Similarly, Lacan's mirror stage brilliantly summarizes narcissism's necessity in the establishment of the ego. For Lacan, narcissism is caught up in the lure of the Imaginary (i.e. in the play of mirror images) ("Mirror" 75-81). As Lorenzo Chiesa argues, it is within this relation to the Imaginary—or, in other words, the subject's foundational construction of the ego in an alienating and alienated image—that Lacan's early work locates the unique drama of human subjectivity (12-34). In Lacan's return to Freud, which is fundamentally opposed to the American tradition of ego psychology, psychoanalysis aims to reveal the illusory nature of the ego and to puncture the

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subject's narcissistic relation to it (Chiesa 13-14). At the same time, however, Lacan is ultimately more invested than Freud in expanding the theory of narcissism because of his conviction in the lure of the Imaginary ego, as evidenced by his proclamation that the mirror stage is an identifiable and fundamental instance in childhood development. Much more pessimistically than Freud, Lacan utilizes his theory of the *objet a* to argue that following the foundational establishment of the subject's relation to the ego in the mirror stage, true object relations become nearly impossible given the function of the *objet a* as a narcissistic remainder, which interferes in any given inter-subjective relation (Chiesa 156-66). This function of the *objet a* as a narcissistic remainder, which stymies proper object relations, is pessimistically if also pithily summarized in Lacan's insistence, *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* (Lacan "Seminar" 58-63).

While Lacan relies on the concept of the *objet a* to explain the difficulty of inter-subjective relations, OOP similarly and perhaps more drastically insists on the fundamental impossibility of unmediated inter-objective relations tout court. For example, Harman argues that in any given encounter, there is only one perceiving real object encountering an entirely sensuous realm, any sense of which can only be garnered through metaphor, or what Bryant refers to as translation. In other words, there is no meeting between real objects, which instead remain withdrawn from one another. Similarly, Freud insists that the pathological narcissist is untreatable through the methods of psychoanalysis, given his utter independence from external object relations. According to the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, this withdrawal from the external world can make an individual psychotic. Following this logic, OOP's object world could be characterized as populated by free-floating psychotics, or what we may otherwise identify as pathologically narcissistic objects. Additionally, and more consistent with the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism, as indicated by Harman's concept of allure, OOP's proposed failure of external relationality corresponds to a libidinal fixation on self-relation.

OOP affectively communicates its investment in the failure of relationality through the rhetorical device of the list, or what Ian Bogost refers to as the "Latour litany" (38-39). Mimicking Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory as a stylistic device, OOP appropriates the aesthetic of the list, in which a variety of objects democratically coexist but only limitedly interact (Bogost 38-39). Latour's Actor Network Theory deprioritizes human, social, or institutional agency, proposing instead a network of influence composed of objects, technologies, ideas, and a variety of other human and non-human

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components, and reiterates the premise of a flat ontology so that "all objects equally exist although they don't exist equally" (Bogost 11). Underlining the philosophical conviction of a true democracy of objects and the belief that the human is only different in degree and not in kind from any other object, OOP's lists are often populated by both the mundane and the exceptional. Objects emphasized in the list of Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, include DVD players, automobiles, kudzu, and a variety of foodstuffs. The democratic list's aesthetic is akin to photo-sharing social media platforms such as Instagram, where a variety of objects from the grand and geographical to the small and domestic are all rendered alike in scale and significance by the square photo format of the application software's photostream. On these platforms, objects appear alongside one another and are perused via a scrolling action, which creates what Bogost might refer to as a flat "compendium of collocation" (38).

Similarly, the recent work of contemporary artist, Chloe Wise, which frequently alludes to social media



Figure 1. Chloe Wise, *Virgo Triennial*, 2017. Oil on Canvas.

aesthetics and selfie culture, relies on the aesthetic of the list or the compendium. For example, the academic-style paintings and installations included in Wise's 2017 exhibition *Of False Beaches and Butter Money* provocatively represent the human subject amongst an odd consortium of objects including eighteenth-century silver tea sets, papayas, and cartons of Almond Breeze brand label almond milk, amongst other items. The frequently female figures featured in Wise's oil paintings, such as *Virgo Triennial* (fig. 1), exhibit a noticeable flatness of affect in their illegible expressions—this serves to undermine their subjectivity, making them appear as objects. Not unlike OOP's lists, Wise's practice treats the human figure as one of many potential and enumerable objects, as something to easily insert into the still life, a genre of classical painting traditionally bereft of the human form. In addition, one of Wise's contemporary still life installations included in the exhibition and used as promotional material on Wise's Instagram account, *Void-of-course Probiotic Promise*, recognizably engages with the iconography of Ovid's Narcissus, and more specifically with Caravaggio's well-known painting of the myth. The installation includes a female face on the surface of a mirrored pedestal, where her image appears as if in reflection, which is both beneath and among the other still life items that surround it.

While Wise's *Void-of-course Probiotic Promise* provocatively alludes to narcissism's libidinal taking of the self as object, this relation is made altogether plain in Kanye West's recent music video *Famous*. For *Famous*, West commissioned several exacting, anatomically correct sculptures of contemporary celebrity icons including himself and his wife Kim Kardashian-West (Zara, par. 7) (fig. 2). The nude sculptures, which appear together in the video sleeping in the same large bed, also have the animatronic capability to heave as if breathing, and thus seem to hover in the uncanny valley between life and death, subject and object. Yet, if anything, West seems less interested in convincing spectators of the sculptures' animacy and lifelikeness than he does in insisting on their durability as objects. This interest in the object's condition is especially underlined in West's decision to later exhibit the sculptures as an installation at the Blum & Poe gallery in Los Angeles (Zara, pars.1-2). While the sculptures commissioned for *Famous* certainly comment on the extension of contemporary celebrity culture caused by social media and function as a type of wish fulfillment that literalizes each celebrity's iconic status, a photograph circulated by the media during the summer of 2016 underscores the project's grandiosity and unabashed narcissism. Similar to Wise's *Void-of-course Probiotic Promise*, the photo of Kim Kardashian-West



Figure 2. Kanye West and DONDA, Installation View, *Famous Sculptures*. Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles, 2016.

leaning over the sculpture of her likeness in admiration recalls Caravaggio's *Narcissus* and underscores what Lacan's mirror-stage only intimates; it shows that narcissism should likely spread with the proliferation of self-reflective media in selfie culture, which not only produce but also further sustain the self as an external object for contemplation (fig. 3).

In *The Democracy of Objects*, Levi Bryant seems convinced that rejecting correlationism and disavowing human exceptionalism is a strong enough gesture to escape accusations of narcissism. However, as psychoanalytic theory, and particularly Lacan's mirror stage proves, narcissism, like OOP more generally, is preoccupied with the image (*imago*) of the subject as an object. Tellingly, Harman's concept of allure prioritizes the object's relation to itself as the aesthetic instance par excellence, which is also the moment of the object's existence that the philosopher most effusively imagines. According to Harman, the aesthetic instance of allure is the object-state in which, once removed from the controlling perception of any other external real object, the sensuous qualities of an object begin to orbit around their own



Figure 3. Kim Kardashian-West visits *Famous* Installation. Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles, 2016.

withdrawn real object and in the process become charged with its essence (103-04). While Harman's choice of the word *allure* may be suggestive enough of the privilege that he grants to this instance of self-relation, it seems worth quoting him at length to further illustrate this point:

A real object and sensual qualities will meet only when *fused*. In such cases the sensual qualities are stripped from their current sensual overlord and appear to orbit a withdrawn *real* object, an invisible sun bending them to its will. The very invisibility of the object makes it impossible to compress the object together with its sensual qualities into a bland purée, as often happens in boring everyday experience. This fusion occurs for example in artworks of every sort ... Instead of the direct sort of contact that we have with sensual objects, there is an allusion to the silent object in the depths that becomes vaguely fused with its legion of sensual qualities. As a general term for the fusion of withdrawn real objects with accessible surface qualities, we can use the term *allure*. (103-04)

As this pivotal passage of *The Quadruple Object* illustrates, the self-relation, or the event of allure, is privileged as quintessentially aesthetic in Harman's ontology. However, as shown by psychoanalysis or Ovid's myth, narcissism is always already aesthetic. Befitting to today's selfie culture, Harman's concept of allure points to the need to better define and describe the otherwise undertheorized aesthetics of the narcissistic instance or the self-relation. In so doing, OOP and particularly Harman's concept of allure are useful to cognitively map and conceptually refine the stakes of today's selfie culture.

As a result of the proliferation of self-reflective digital technologies in the increasingly visual social media culture of post-Web 2.0, the subject in today's selfie culture may be increasingly object-oriented. However, the libidinal object of preference remains the self. In light of this conjunction, OOP's emergence in blogs and its status as a digitally native philosophy seem crucial (Kotsko 35-36). In her critical media theory of blogging, Jodi Dean ascribes an inherent narcissism to blogging and notes it as a precedent for later largely image-based social media practices of which I would add the selfie as a most climactic development. Dean not only observes that blogs promise, reward, and traffic in "the unique production of singular bloggers" but also comments on the narcissistic feedback loop of the blog, which may be less addressed to an audience than to a blogger's ego (64). Similar to other social media technologies that followed, the ostensible social networking of the blog functions as a mask for a more selfish satisfaction, in which likes, shares, and comments on blogs and other social media

sites have less value as the marks of external interaction than as indicators of an internal surplus value. Recalling the trivial details of the day-to-day that often clutter any given blog entry, it is worthwhile to note how often the objects utilized as examples in OOP intentionally overwhelm readers. While this tendency is seemingly methodical in order to emphasize the radical flatness proposed by OOP, it is also noteworthy that OOP's exemplary objects—Bryant's "beloved" blue coffee mug or his cats, Harman's dream or Bogost's childhood—do not fall much further afield than the philosopher's arm's reach—a limited range not coincidentally akin to that necessary for narcissistic rumination before the mirror or likewise, the snapping of a selfie (Bryant 172).

As a result of the proliferation of self-reflective digital technologies in the increasingly visual social media culture of post-Web 2.0, the subject in today's selfie culture may be increasingly object-oriented.

Within the academy, the claims of OOP are often taken as a provocation: greeted as radical, even ungrounded, but from the perspective of visual culture studies, they seem to be a natural conceptual extension of selfie culture. The theory of an object-oriented subject preached by OOP is, in other words, also actively produced by reflective digital media technologies. OOP and selfie culture both register a shift in the subject's relation to the object. While Slavoj Žižek insists that the essence of human experience is connoted by the hysterical question—what am I as object?—(79) one may doubt the universality of this analogy, or at least its characterization as hysterical, in an age in which experience is now saturated by self-reflective technologies and media forms that provide nearly constant opportunities to contemplate both the self and the subject as image and object. In his assessment of the emergence of the modern art movement of minimalism in the late 1960s, art historian and critic Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood" registered a certain subjective shock in the experience of being among objects in a minimalist installation, which he described as a sort of confrontation and an affront (155). However, if selfie culture and OOP are any indication, the implication that the subject is itself an object seems today to have lost a good deal of its sting. While we indeed should continue to quarrel with the political and ethical implications of this thought, this essay has

intended to illustrate that thinking of an object-oriented subjectivity (as represented by OOP) is particularly salient in relation to contemporary visual culture. When self-reflective media, such as the selfie, are increasingly reaching a saturation point given, for example, the inclusion of facial-recognition technology on the iPhone X, it seems only logical that contemporary philosophy finds itself preoccupied with a narcissistic contemplation of the condition of our own objecthood.

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Interview

Dr. Laura U. Marks, Simon Fraser University

Dr. Laura U. Marks is Grant State Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

In your recent research, you've been doing some interesting work with Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy in conjunction with cinema studies. Could you explain how you read his theories and process philosophy more generally?

Many of the philosophers that I have been the most inspired by, including Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Charles Sanders Peirce, Gilbert Simondon, and more recently Abu 'Ali al-Husayn ibn Sînâ and Sadr al-Dîn al-Shîrâzî, are process philosophers. Each gives us methods to think about images; note that for Bergson that means everything, the universe is a flow of images. These philosophers are quite useful for letting us think about how our world consists of a flow of things that are always changing. In distinction, Whitehead has an atomistic approach to process philosophy. He asks us to break the universe down, rather than to posit it as a smooth flow as do other philosophers, such as Simondon. For Whitehead, every entity in the universe, which he calls either an actual entity or an actual occasion, is engaged within an atomistic process. Each of them comes into being through a process that has an endpoint. They achieve "satisfaction" by absorbing all of the information from their vicinity in the way that they think best. When that process is finished, this actual entity is complete and shows itself to the rest of the world. Interestingly, that coming out is also the moment of the actual entity's death, and it becomes immortal. So this is the kind of atomistic universe that Whitehead makes us think of, that things are always com-

ing to the end of themselves, which marks the moment they become available to others.

Why do you think Whitehead's approach is important to emphasize in today's digital media climate?

Process philosophy helps us think about the relationship between audiences and media: we can use it to study reception. It allows us to consider how the film, game, or Instagram post changes each time as it encounters different audiences. This approach emphasizes that each encounter will produce something new. (I think this approach, like many things people attribute to Whitehead, originated with Peirce). In this way, as media circulate in the world, every encounter populates the world with more entities. A Whiteheadian approach is an effective way to analyze a media work as a series of atomistic occasions that achieve satisfaction. By following this methodology, all of the elements that enter the work can be included in the analysis, and not filtered in the way that they would be with apparatus theory, for example.

This emphasis of process philosophy on relationality and the connectivity between all entities seems to be at the core of a lot of your writing. Is this focus on interconnection utopic?

Yes, it is utopic; it's an ecological theory. The theories I make and the ones that I bring together all, in some way, deal with revealing interconnections. I think my understanding is growing more complex and historically richer. For example, I've recently found that at least half of the philosophies that I'm interested in are inspired by Islamic Neoplatonism, a philosophy of an interconnected cosmos. However, I don't think that the simple conclusion that everything is connected is all that useful. Whether drawing on a concept from Deleuze, Whitehead, Avicenna, or Mulla Sadra, I think what's important to do is to choose carefully which path to unfold and which connection to demonstrate. So one criterion for doing this kind of work is to choose the surprising connections. Most modern people don't want to believe that the universe is a closed whole whose contents are known by God, because that makes us feel unfree. A more modern version of this open universe is in thinking of all these interconnections as unknown, opening to the future in ways that are not known to anybody. It means that we have to choose a series of connections that is important and meaningful for a specific reason (say, a political or aesthetic one) and follow it carefully, not knowing what the results may be. Philosophically, it's very exciting. A lot of ecological thinking nowadays is working on exactly this idea, grappling with how we can point out the interconnections among things

in the world in a way that helps prevent further damage to people and the planet. We're in a very good time for this work, when the political, aesthetic, and maybe even spiritual importance of recognizing interconnections in the world or the universe is becoming more recognized.

This global climate also allows a greater degree of cross-pollination of theoretical work. Do you think there are finally new avenues for non-Western philosophies to enter into our traditionally Western-centric media studies discourse?

Yes. There are a couple of different ways to go about it. One is to identify and deepen the non-Western roots of Western philosophy, especially regarding cinema and media. Another is to do comparative philosophy, bringing non-Western philosophy into contact with contemporary media regardless of historical connection. For example, using Chinese traditional aesthetics, or Indian *rasa* theory, to develop a theory of embodied reception in cinema (see for example the recent issue of *Film-Philosophy*, "A World of Cinemas"). It's a healthy climate for intercultural media studies now, because there are many scholars who are interested in deepening these roots due to their own cultural backgrounds, and there are people of European extraction, like me, who do it because we're tired of the same old Western names reappearing again and again.

Could you explain more about your approach to uncovering those non-Western influences within Western thought?

First, it's definitely the case that there are fundamental roots of Islamic thought in European philosophy. At one point, from the 12th to 14th centuries, these influences were acknowledged, but then they gradually were forgotten or whitewashed. For contemporary scholars, part of the work is simply uncovering connections that are already there. I'm currently working on a project to find the through-line that connects Shi'a philosophy to early Renaissance alchemy and natural philosophy, and all the way to process philosophers like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Deleuze. The second part of my method, after the historical links are exhausted (to my ability, anyway) is to do fabulative philosophy, asking, "What if there hadn't been this great split between Europe and the Muslim world?" For example, if Leibniz (1646-1716) had read Sadrâ (1571-1636), we would have a different history of philosophy. Since their ideas have so many similarities and they share Avicenna as a common root, they could have chatted—for example, to compare Leibniz's theory that unity creates through differentiation and Sadrâ's theory that it creates through modulation—and we would be much further advanced by now. One

consequence of ethnic cleansing and racist division is a damper on the progress of knowledge. Of course, scholars doing this kind of work must be careful not to blur the differences between concepts, because it's really important to understand how ideas were cultivated in their original context. This allows us to assess how we can use them today—for example, how we might import concepts from a religious philosophy to a secular context.

Do you think it's becoming more important to use this approach to de-Westernizing philosophy in today's hybridized and intermedial media climate?

It wouldn't hurt! In fact many cultures have a long history of intermediality. In my research on the deep history of algorithmic media for *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, I saw a great deal of intermediality in classical Islamic art. For example, the same motif would move from book illuminations, to architecture, to textiles. Each time, it would have to change to suit the affordances of a new medium. Similarly, I'm sure that any culture that has a tradition of migrating content among platforms, such as the fractal platforms of domestic architecture, sand divination, and hair braiding that Ron Eglash writes about in *African Fractals*, would have a lot to say about that.

You've developed another theoretical approach that has important implications for studying new digital media—your methodology of enfolding/unfolding aesthetics, which you've used to explain the operations of digital archiving platforms and the aesthetic of the glitch, among other things. How else might one apply this idea? Does it work on all media—virtual reality or video games, for instance?

In 2000, I started working on that idea, and since then I've done a lot of case studies of enfolding/unfolding aesthetics. *Enfoldment and Infinity's* last five chapters each suggest a different "manner of unfolding": how a source is selected and transformed by an informational filter before it reaches perception. With any medium or artwork, digital or otherwise, you can use this method. For example, you mentioned video games—we could try to detect its sources through our sensory perception. Where has it come from and where is it going? This methodology starts with your perceptions and your body, but it quickly connects you to historical, material, and affective sources. Some media are very generous in the way that they unfold. They unfold completely and show you their histories. Others are very deeply enfolded, almost an-iconic. For instance, in my past work, I've provided examples of complete enfoldment in some classical Islamic

art that corresponds with the Sunni theological idea that you shouldn't try to interpret religious texts. Another example is a smoothly functioning digital hardware-software platform broadcasting a high-quality, non-bootlegged movie stream without any flaws: the movie will appear to be almost completely separate from its material origins. I would argue that this super-visibility is actually a kind of an-iconism, because it doesn't allow you to unfold the image's origin.

How do you feel about the general assumption that new media has largely abandoned a reliance on traditional forms of materiality?

I think it's important to interrogate that idea, because computer-based media are no less material than analog media. Media corporations do a very good job of convincing people that digital technologies are relatively immaterial, for example that digital cinema is less material than celluloid. However, a little examination reveals this not to be true. Arild Fetveit points out that in digital media, it's often the case that the hardware platform exists elsewhere, and so, all we're seeing is the software. For example, when we stream videos at home, we take for granted that this movie appearing on our screen is the medium. In fact, the medium includes the server, which telecommunications companies rely on to stream the movie to us, and servers use enormous amounts of energy. The so-called "cloud" consumes 5% of the world's energy and produces more carbon emissions than the airline industry. When we watch a streaming video, we're burning coal, contributing to the increase in global warming—it's a completely material process! There's also the mined materials that go into computers and mobile phones, whose extraction sustains conflicts and human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries. Our media devices enfold all these destructive and unjust circumstances of their production—and they're also very difficult to recycle. They appear sleek, immaterial, and virtual, but they're very materially imbricated with the globe. (That's why I'm on the waiting list to buy a Fairphone!) Further, I have never believed that digital media were non-indexical. In 2000, I published an essay called "How

Electrons Remember," where I "prove" that the indexical bond remains in every one of the seven levels of a digital video's production, except for the quantum level. For example, in a digital camera, most of the processes remain physical, analog processes. They illustrate the Peircian concept of strong indexicality, where the object actually causes a change in the sign.

If our media is just as material and as indexical as it always was, then do we need to change the way we talk about the recording and archiving of new media?

There is a notion that all the archived materials that we need are now available online, but that's not true. If you do any amount of archival research on a topic that is not very popular, it will quickly come to a dead end with online sources, because most things in the world have not been digitized. As film archivists know, sometimes only a single copy of a film exists, maybe cobbled together from several sources. There's certainly an enormous volume of audio-visual images created precisely for online circulation, producing new kinds of evanescent, often proprietary archives—but that doesn't mean that everything is up there. In some ways, I think this is a first-world illusion that everything's available. The ideology of immateriality also erases the huge amount of labour that goes into digitization. However, even when media are available online in a coal-fed digital archive, it's possible to discern the traces of the labour that produced them and the paths that they took to arrive to us.

In a lot of current scholarly discourse, the term "new media" is increasingly used—do you think this is a useful term?

I think that "algorithmic media" is more appropriate, because it describes a lot of what computer-based media do, and it also allows us to contextualize computer-based media within older or analog algorithmic media. To get a sense of what this term means you just have to look at the definition of "algorithm," which is a procedure that produces a given result. This term is also more useful because it opens up algorithmic media's wonderfully deep and cross-cultural historical context.



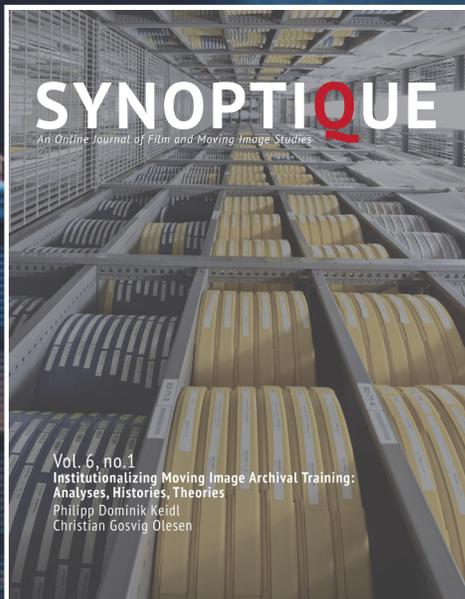
SYNOPTIQUE

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Synoptique: An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies is a double-blind peer-reviewed open access journal housed in the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University (Canada). Founded in 2008, the journal has promoted innovative research in film and media studies, combining a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches—publishing special issues on topics as diverse as queer media practices, Indian cinema, moving image archives and the digital transition, film festival networks, queer nationalism, humour and feminist media theory, the aesthetics of cinema technology, and archival film training. This year the journal is undergoing deep changes in order to better reflect the most pressing research concerns and priorities within media studies. As the field has been recently affected by a profound reevaluation of its traditional paradigms, Synoptique intends to provide a platform for publication, discussion, and reflection on the new political-cultural formations shaping media studies discourse. In this respect, the journal aims to intervene in key debates within media studies while critically tackling the economics and politics of scholarly activity, addressing dominant trends in academic research conducted within the historical, ideological, and institutional limits of the neoliberal university. In addition to, and as an extension of, this impetus, the journal aims to showcase approaches that address the transnational and global dimensions of moving image media research.

— Latest Issue —

Institutionalizing Moving Image Archival Training:
Analyses, Histories, Theories.
(eds. Philipp Dominik Keidl & Christian Gosvig Olesen)



— Current Call for Papers —

Becoming Environmental:
Media, Logistics, and Ecological Change
(eds. Patrick Brodie, Lisa Han, Weixian Pan)

The focus of this issue will be on the increasing entanglements of global economies of extraction and the circulation of media. This issue seeks to investigate the distinctive ways media—from computation, infrastructures, screens, technologies of circulation, and different modes of visualization—become environmental, remaining attentive to how these emerging human/nonhuman relations are constantly reconfigured, if not naturalized, via the state, global market, or other ideological projects.

/ Submissions Open /
/ Deadline: April 30, 2018 /
/ synoptique.ca /



Call Me by Your Name

Call Me by Your Name, Luca Guadagnino's latest film (*I Am Love, A Bigger Splash*), is a coming-of-age story centered around the blossoming relationship between Elio (Timothée Chalamet), a high-schooler, and a graduate student named Oliver (Armie Hammer). Set during a 1980s Italian summer, Elio's professorial family invites Oliver to come live with them in their summer home. Beautiful, brilliant, and mysterious, Oliver sexually intrigues Elio through the overwhelming shock of his presence. *Call Me by Your Name* provides limited (but unique!) insights regarding the stakes of love.

Explicitly engaged with André Aciman's question, "Is it better to speak or to die?", *Call Me by Your Name* attempts to provide a universally applicable answer. Primarily through the physicality of Timothée Chalamet's star-making performance, *Call Me by Your Name* sides resoundingly with the former. As Elio gains sexual confidence and transparency, his body shifts from tense and distant to inviting and open. He suddenly strides as if he's a character in Jacques Demy's *Young Girls of Rochefort*. However, the film's thrust toward a universal conclusion is only made possible by disregarding any critical reflection upon its characters' whiteness, education, and economic affluence. Despite its restrictions, while searching for a universal conclusion, *Call Me by Your Name* remains beautiful filmmaking. The undeniable chemistry between the leads, the warm and beautiful cinematography, and Michael Stuhlbarg (as Elio's dad) giving the year's most touching paternal speech, make *Call Me by Your Name* a must-watch.

Review by: Morgan Harper



24 Frames

Abbas Kiarostami's final feature-length film is an elegiac and philosophical meditation on life and death inside the frame. *24 Frames* gradually unfolds outwards from its first digitally and delicately rendered scene: an animated contemplation of Bruegel's famous "Hunters in the Snow". From here, the film enlivens its following 23 still frames over the course of 2 hours, drawing on visual and thematic motifs to unite the would-be fractured film into a coherently dreamlike and living whole.

While the scenes at times feel overburdened by their four-and-a-half-minute lengths, patient viewers are rewarded with a deep-delve into 24 richly sensuous environments. Each scene's mini-narrative provides a modest arc of action that holds attention, while also setting itself provocatively at odds with the aesthetic contemplation otherwise required by the film.

The film's thoughtful re-mediation of portraiture on film constantly teeters on the edge of exposing its own seams—the animation seems to stand a plane apart from the still image backdrops, carefully inviting viewers into the film's own reflexive examination of media, narrative, and thematic.

24 Frames is a cerebrally stimulating film and sumptuous delight, with imagery that will continue to haunt you long after the credits have rolled.

Review by: Zoë Laks



Happy End

A bourgeoisie family's lack of security; modern technology's desensitizing traits; spectatorship as complicity. While *Happy End*, Michael Haneke's 12th feature film, contains many themes that have recurred throughout his oeuvre, their disjointed combination reconfigures their initial familiarity with an alarming aloofness. This aloofness arises from each narrative or thematic strand lacking the appropriate amount of time and exploration that Haneke has provided them in previous films. However, their new context reinvigorates them, primarily through the aspect most notably absent from Haneke's previous work: his polemical style. Serving more to allude to previous arguments and less to convince audiences that their conclusions are still relevant, Haneke seems to be asking viewers for the first time: what do you think?

Featuring alluringly reserved cinematography, a loaded cast (Isabelle Huppert and Jean-Louis Trintignant, amongst others), and the most spastically beautiful dance scene in French cinema since *Beau Travail* (Franz Rogowski's karaoke performance of Sia's "Chandelier"), *Happy End* may be reflexive but also stands confidently on its own. If not for any other reason, *Happy End* is worth seeing for the opportunity to watch Michael Haneke cautiously interfacing with Facebook and Snapchat.

Review by: Morgan Harper



The Green Fog

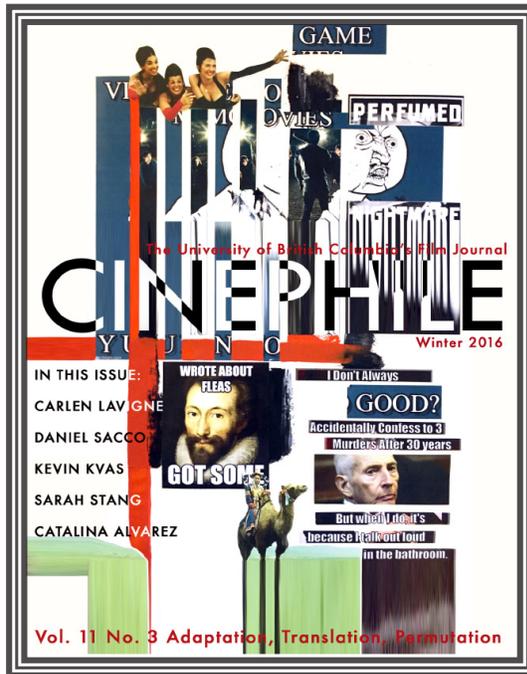
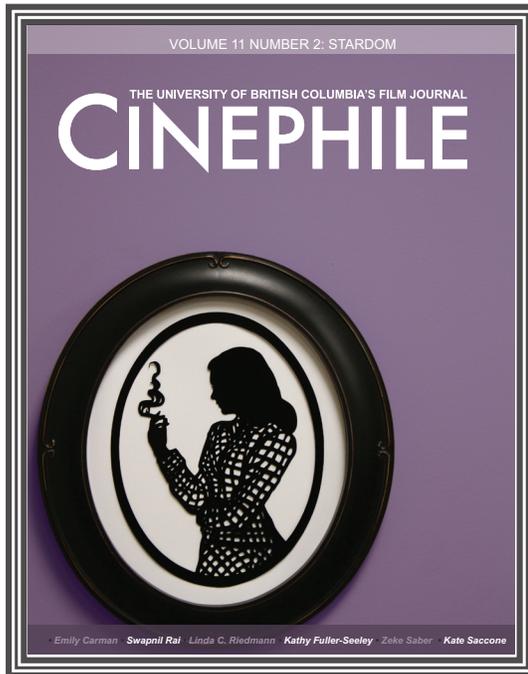
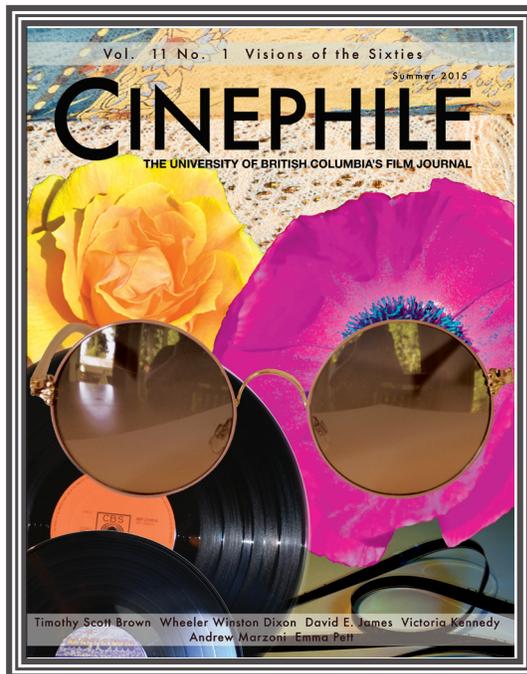
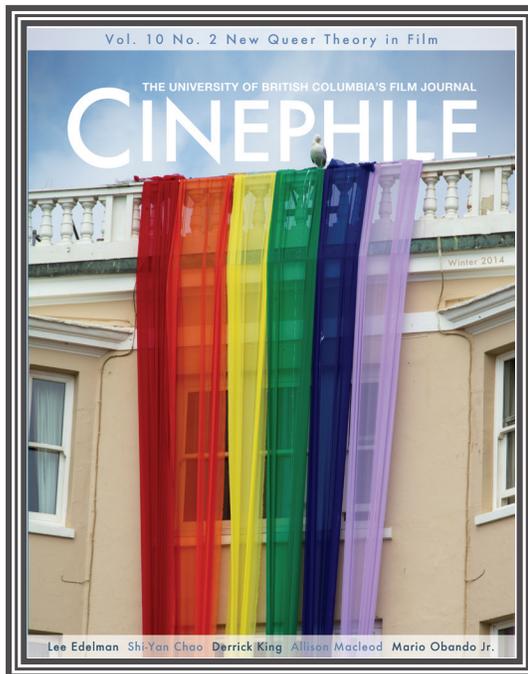
The latest collaborative project from the brothers Evan and Galen Johnson and the always intriguing Guy Maddin, *The Green Fog* loosely retells the story of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* through a dizzying compilation of San Francisco-based films and a live orchestra performance by the Kronos Quartet. A cheekily postmodern mashup that barely clings to its own plot, the film weaves itself together through its themes of performance and communication, its reliance on the internal logic of its performed score, and the mysterious omnipresence of the eponymous fog itself, which seeps into scenes with a threatening, campy, and oozy menace reminiscent of *The Blob*.

Containing a healthy dose of Maddin-isms, the film's emphasis on disjuncture—between sound and screen, characters, and shots themselves—draws attention to its own multimedial experimentation, at times becoming more performance than film. While it struggles at times to maintain a clarity of vision under the burden of its own frivolity, the film manages to cohere around its both tragic and comic appeal to silent cinema, defining itself as a "cinema of glances."

Playful, absurd, obtuse, and intersectional, *The Green Fog* invites its viewers into its weird wonder with a provocative mix of the melancholy and the raucous that you'll need to see to believe.

Review by: Zoë Laks



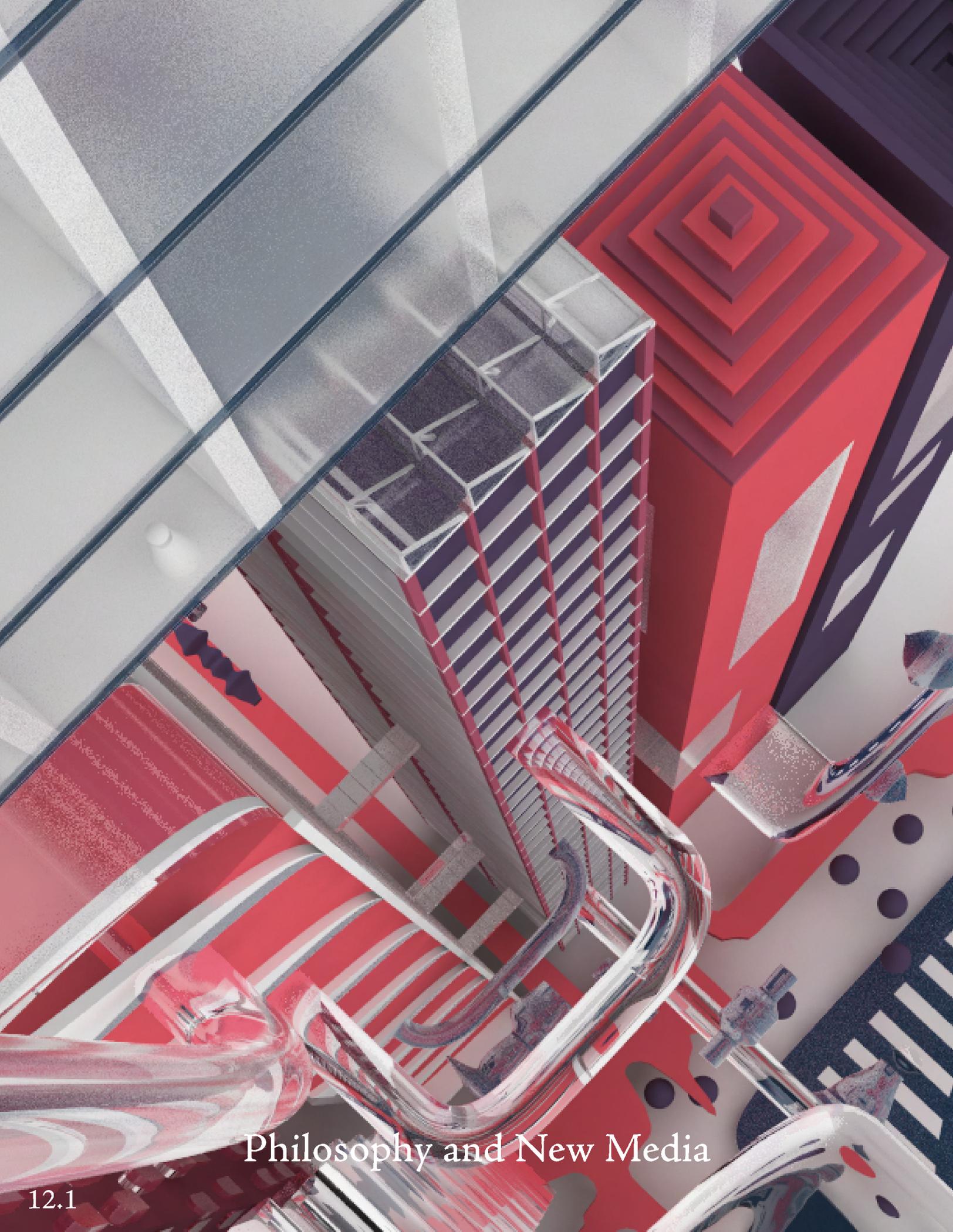


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UPCOMING ISSUE: LOW CULTURE

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Philosophy and New Media