

CINSPHILES

The University of British
Columbia's Film Journal

SPRING 2024
Vol. 18 No. 1

FEATURING

Shane Denson
Orrin Pavone
James Sweeting
Alice Reiter
Stephanie Kang
+ a special article from Yani Kong



(Un)Recovering
The Future

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The University of British
Columbia's Film Journal

Vol. 18 No. 1
Spring 2024
“(Un)Recovering The Future”

ISSN: 1712-9265

Copyright and Publisher
The University of British
Columbia Film Program

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CINEPHILE is published by the Gradu-
ate Program in Film Studies at the
Department of Theatre and Film,
University of British Columbia, with the
support of the
Centre for Cinema Studies
centreforcinemastudies.com

UBC Film Program

Department of Theatre and Film

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Contributors

Shane Denson is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies in the Department of Art & Art History and, by Courtesy, of German Studies in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages and of Communication in Stanford's Department of Communication. He is currently the Director of the PhD Program in Modern Thought and Literature, as well as Director of Graduate Studies in Art History.

His latest book, *Post-Cinematic Bodies*, was published in June 2023 by meson press. The book asks: How is human embodiment transformed in an age of algorithms? How do post-cinematic media technologies such as AI, VR, and robotics target and re-shape our bodies? *Post-Cinematic Bodies* grapples with these questions by attending both to mundane devices—such as smartphones, networked exercise machines, and smart watches and other wearables equipped with heartrate sensors—as well as to new media artworks that rework such equipment to reveal to us the ways that our fleshly existences are increasingly up for grabs. Through an equally philosophical and interpretive analysis, the book aims to develop a new aesthetics of embodied experience that is attuned to a new age of predictive technology and metabolic capitalism.

Stephanie Kang (she/they) is an art historian, artist, and curator who specializes in contemporary art with a focus on new media art and theory. She received an MFA in Visual Art from Washington University in St. Louis and a PhD in the History of Art from the Ohio State University. Her writings have been published in journals and magazines like *Flash Art*, *Runner Magazine*, and *Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus*. As an artist, her works have been exhibited nationally and internationally, and she has also organized several exhibitions in her previous role as the assistant curator at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Art History and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at the University of Denver.

Orrin Pavone is an alumnus of the University of British Columbia's Department of Theatre & Film where he received his B.A. in Film Studies in 2023. His research explores the aesthetics and politics of moving-images, specifically focusing on post-cinematic contemporary media as they relate to notions of identity, belonging, and mass culture. His research methodology is informed by critical intersectional approaches to theories of gender, sexuality, feminism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and film theory. Orrin is a returning Cinephile contributor having first published a review of Sophie Jarvis' film *Until Branches Bend* (2022) in issue 17.1.

James Sweeting is a researcher and PhD advisor with Transtechnology Research having completed a PhD titled 'Hauntological Videogame Form: Nostalgia and a "High Technology" Medium'. His research focus is on understanding the changing form of videogames, how it is impacted by the supporting industry, the presence of nostalgia across the videogames medium, and the relationship it has with the past. He is a lecturer in Game Studies and a programme leader at the University of Plymouth.

Alice Reiter holds an MA in Film Studies at Concordia University's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema. She previously obtained her BFA in Film Production from the same school, and uses her formal knowledge of filmmaking to inform her research on contemporary Palestinian cinema. Her thesis centres on formal analysis of experimental films, dissecting how natural and built environments are represented and re-appropriated by Palestinian filmmakers.

Yani Kong is a writer, editor, and scholar of contemporary art in Vancouver, Canada. She has published essays for *The Photographer's Gallery*, London, UK; *The Gordon and Marion Smith Foundation*, Vancouver BC; *The Freedman Gallery*, Reading PA, and is a regular contributor to *Galleries West*. She is

SSHRC Doctoral Fellow of Contemporary Art at the School for the Contemporary Arts (SCA), Simon Fraser University, researching reception aesthetics and contemporary art history. As a member of the Low Carbon Research Methods Working Group, she explores sustainable practices in streaming media. Kong is a faculty member in the department of art history and religious studies at Langara College and is the Yukon/BC representative for the Universities Arts Association Congress.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

The late cultural theorist Mark Fisher asks in his seminal text *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative*, "How long can a culture persist without the new?" For Fisher, the postmodern future under capitalist realism "harbors only reiteration and re-permutation" (2008, 6-7). In capitalism's inability to look beyond itself, media culture has become excessively nostalgic and "incapable of generating any authentic novelty" (2008, 63). Accordingly, one can observe a certain malaise surrounding media's inability to imagine new and alternative futures.

Music, fashion, film, TV, and digital media have all primarily engaged in nostalgia rather than an imagination of the future. Moreover, this nostalgia has been formalized through an aestheticization of the past — fashion and style trends mimic 70s, 80s, and 90s culture, while the emulation of film grain in digital cinema is more common. One need not look further than recent cultural touchstones such as eighties exploitation in *Stranger Things* (2016) and *Joker* (2019), greatest hits soundtracks in *Baby Driver* (2017) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and contemporary sampling practices evident in Jack Harlowe's "First Class" to find that innovation in form and material is no longer embraced by the mainstream. Instead, these media foreground the past such that nostalgic pastiche and aesthetic remediation is the text. What is more, media texts not explicitly set in past milieus insist on this ahistorical fetishization of past aesthetics through their very form.

The above query will be tackled through a series of essays meticulously curated for you in this edition of *Cinephile*. These essays offer a rich tapestry of responses to the cultural diagnosis, spanning political, theoretical, and

philosophical implications of this cultural malaise – and its potential counterforces – as they intersect with evolving digital media and technology, minor and major cinema, postcolonialism and marginalized identities, algorithms and artificial intelligence, and other cultural phenomena. As editors, we underscore the particular relevance of these essays in their interplay with emerging artificial intelligence, contemporary global conflict, and climate change, among other pressing issues.

We are honored to present the inaugural article, "Artificial Intelligence," by Shane Denson, an esteemed associate professor of Film and Media studies at Stanford University. Denson's profound insights have been a cornerstone of our call, and his latest work, *Post-Cinematic Bodies*, continues his pivotal exploration into the transformative (post-)cinematic technologies and their impact on our (shared) physical and mental being. In this piece, Denson delves into the philosophical and ethical implications of emerging A.I. technology, challenging the presumed neutrality of A.I.' thinking.'

Stephanie Kang's contribution delves into *Everything But the World* (2022), a video work by the art collective DIS, renowned for their exploration of the contemporary condition of our shared world and the myriad crises we confront. Kang deciphers DIS's envisioning of alternative forms of existence in a world seemingly on the brink. Ryan Trecartin, a character in the DIS video work and the creative force behind *Centre-Jenny* (2013), takes center stage in the next article by Orrin Pavone. Pavone's cross-cultural analysis spans various media forms: film, fashion, and photography, as he proposes a fresh philosophical framework for understanding the pervasive pastiche impulse

in our visual and sonic culture. His critical essay offers novel insights into the intersecting role of imperialism and capitalism in popular and avant-garde media works.

James Sweeting introduces a new foil in this conversation, refashioning Jacques Derrida's hauntological form by examining video games and nostalgia culture. Sweeting responds to our call by shifting our gaze away from film and finding new insights to be drawn from other popular media forms. Importantly, Sweeting suggests a potential digression from the doom and gloom tone that this cultural malaise potentially elicits from many critics. Alice Reiter further destabilizes the focus of this edition of *Cinephile* by asking us to turn away from Western media forms by examining Palestinian artist Larrisa Sansour's film *In Vitro*. Reiter's analysis is, of course, incredibly poignant given our current global moment.

Finally, we proudly present a special article by Yani Kong on small-file media. Kong presented a version of this essay to a group of undergraduate students here at UBC during the winter as a part of the inaugural UBC Cinema and Media Studies undergraduate conference. With help from the Department of Theatre and Film at UBC and the UBC Film Society, the UBC Cinema and Media Studies undergraduate conference was a major success that we hope will continue to provide an ongoing platform for undergraduate students to share and learn from each other and foster a sense of inquiry and a culture of research that spans from both undergraduate and graduate students to faculty at UBC and beyond.

If, as Gilles Deleuze suggests in his late essay "Postscripts on Society of Control," we have found ourselves in a society no longer defined by discipline, but by the mechanism of con-

trol exasperated by digital technologies, then we must be wary of what is under the purview of systemic control. In a talk delivered in 2011 at a UMass conference, Alexander Galloway suggested the main lesson to be learned from Deleuze's essay is need for historical thinking in the face of the dehistorical logic of control societies. In other words, time, like any other factor of our lives, is subject to control, and in order to resist the momentum of the late-stage neoliberal control society, we must preserve the past such that we might imagine a future different from the forever now that adheres to the desires of Capital. We hope this issue helps you think more critically about nostalgia; past, present, and future; and our contemporary moment in new and enlightening ways.

Sincerely,

Will and Liam Riley



ARTIFICIAL IMAGINATION

By Shane Denson

Imagination, we might say, is the very height of artifice. It is the faculty by which we are able to “make things up,” which is to say actualize things that are not real or physically present, and it thus plays a central role in creating (and processing) fictions. Imagination, as a power of artifice, is therefore implicated in—perhaps responsible for—pulling human existence out of the purely mechanical causal circuits that might be imputed to insentient nature. But if imagination is the purest expression of our artificial natures, it is also the infrastructural substrate out of which artifice—the artificial, the common ground of art and technics—arises in the first place. It is by way of imagination that we are able to invent not only stories but also tools and techniques. Imagination is the power by which we envision new material processes and implements, and it is no less crucial to our ability to make use of these techniques and technologies—to think ahead towards the completion of a goal, or just to maintain that minimal openness to the future that is required to execute even the simplest technical process, whether stirring a pot or navigating a car around a tight corner.

As both expression and enabling condition of artifice, imagination encircles human existence, laying the ground for our phenomenal and material transcendence of mineral, organic, or mechanical nature. We might, as Jean-Paul Sartre did, find in the imagination the very condition of our freedom.¹ If we choose to follow that route, we see this freedom rooted in a perhaps

1. Indeed, the grounds for Sartre’s existentialism are laid in two books devoted to the topic: *The Imagination* (1936) and *The Imaginary* (1940). The latter book, in particular, discovers freedom in our ability to conjure images of objects that are not present or real.

terrifying lack of foundations: by way of imagination, we embody the absolute negation of any sort of fixed or essential actuality. At the same time, this encircling of human existence by the imagination—its function as both foundation and expression of artifice—is not untethered from the material world; it is, instead, bound up with technicity, *our technicity*, as the condition of our ecstatic way of being, our being constantly ahead or outside of ourselves. The circularity expressed here in terms of infrastructure and expression is thus closely aligned with that material-hermeneutic circle that Martin Heidegger, in his famous tool analysis, uncovered as an endless and foundationless play of reference—which is to say: perhaps nothing less than the “worldhood of the world” itself is at stake in the imagination.²

In drawing these admittedly broad connections between imagination and artifice, I aim to open up questions about the role of the imagination in the long history of what I have called the “anthropotechnical interface” (or what Bernard Stiegler calls “epiphylogenesis,” or human-technological “transduction” in Gilbert Simondon’s sense).³ At the same time, I hope that this line of questioning will help us to think about *contemporary* anthropotechnical transformations or negotiations, specifically those emerging around artificial intelligence. What is the relation of imagination to AI? Does AI expand or endanger human imagination, or

2. I am referring, of course, to Heidegger’s analysis of “equipment,” by way of a hammer, whereby human involvement in the world is discovered in *Being and Time* (91-119).

3. On the anthropotechnical interface, see Denson, *Postnaturalism*; for epiphylogenesis, see Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1; and for transduction, see Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*.

does it even embody its own artificial form of imagination? These are in a sense inevitable questions, I contend—at least, if one can entertain the connections between imagination and artifice that I have been making here. In the following, I attempt to provide some provisional answers, arguing that AI does indeed complicate our powers of imagination and thus calls on us to reimagine our place in the world.

“These aren’t images; they’re imagination”

In the course of reflecting on his own playful engagement with text-to-image generators such as DALL-E and Stable Diffusion, Ian Bogost remarks: “These aren’t images; they’re imagination.”⁴ In the context of his essay, Bogost’s assertion is not so much about denying the imagistic qualities of the generated outputs as it is about redirecting the attention we pay to them; specifically, he asks us not to look at them as visual *objects* per se (e.g. potential art objects or commercial images) but instead to regard them as part of a visualization process, shared between an algorithmic system and its human user. Bogost’s experiments, he writes, “have completely changed my view on what AI image creation means. It’s not for making pictures to use, even if that might happen from time to time. Instead, AI images allow people to visualize a concept or an idea—any concept or idea—in a way previously unimaginable.” Thus, generative AI serves, like the imagination in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, as a mediator between the understanding and sensation. But in this case, the imagination is external to the mind, as (according to the essay’s subhead) the “new technologies for making pictures can be prosthetics for your mind.” Bogost speaks of “extending” or “amplifying” the user’s imagination, and this way of regarding the new technologies allows him to navigate between two opposing views: 1) the common worry that artists (or “creatives”) are in danger of being “replaced” by AI, and 2) the assertion that humans are in fact irreplaceable because they are the sole proprietors of creative imagination. Bogost’s *tertium quid* reserves an important role for the human user, who needs to provide the ideas (or “prompts”), but imagination is now partially exteriorized and distributed between human and nonhuman agents.

A similar view is elaborated at greater length by philosopher of technology Galit Wellner under the heading of what she calls “digital imagination.”⁵ Invoking a portrait generated by a GAN, a recursive neural

network that can complete user’s drawings, and an AI-powered robot that can improvise on the marimba with its four hands, Wellner asks: “Do AI algorithms imagine? Can we classify their output as imaginative? What is their effect on human imagination?” (190). To answer these questions, she turns first to Kant, whose model of the imagination guides her further thinking; importantly, however, Wellner argues that Kant’s “conceptualization of the imagination is no longer unique to humans since it is now implemented in AI systems” (190), and this has effects for human imagination. Against Kant’s transcendentalism, Wellner therefore contends that the operation of the imagination is “not a-historical but rather a flexible faculty that is transformed over time as our technologies change” (191). Wellner’s argument is mounted by way of a synthesis of impulses she draws from two philosophers of technology: Don Ihde and Bernard Stiegler. Through this synthesis, Wellner is able to assert that “our imagination maintains co-shaping and co-constituting relationships with our technologies” (191).

I am in broad agreement with Wellner’s (and Bogost’s) historicization of the imagination, which depends on a partial exteriorization of this putatively “inner” mental faculty such that it is (and, for Wellner at least, always has been) linked to the technologies that are both borne of and in turn shape it. But this does not settle the question of *how* the imagination is affected by contemporary AI technologies, and it is Wellner’s picture of *this* relation that I would like to examine further.

Wellner describes two broad epochs or paradigms corresponding to two sets of (media) technologies, analog and digital. In the former epoch, “modern imagination operating in analog environments sought new points of view” (191). She associates this form of imagination with “the proliferation of optic-oriented technologies—from the magnifying glass to telescopes, from photography to cinema” (201); her assertion that “‘analog’ imagination was about seeking new POVs” (201) suggests that these technologies enabled optical variations that modified or displaced vision from its seat in *this* body, instead offering differently situated perspectives that enriched the range of imaginative or visualizable possibilities. In the new epoch, in contrast, “digital imagination [...] works in layers and attempts to link them in new ways” (191). The decisive term here is “layers,” in contrast with the “POVs” of the modern imagination. Wellner associates both of these terms with various phases in Ihde’s work, which she sees progressing from a modern to a digitally informed understanding of imagination, and she draws on them to complete her revision of Kant for the age of AI. Signifi-

4. Bogost, “A Tool to Supercharge Your Imagination.”

5. Wellner, “Digital Imagination: Ihde’s and Stiegler’s Concepts of Imagination.” Further references indicated in the text.

cantly, Ihde does not use the term “layers” himself, but Wellner uses it to characterize his approach to computationally generated images in a relatively recent (2009) article titled “From da Vinci to CAD and Beyond.” Importantly, in that essay Ihde is describing concrete visual phenomena, based in his own experience using CAD software to design his kitchen in the early 1990s (experimenting imaginatively, like Bogost, with various design possibilities), but Wellner generalizes well beyond this original context to assert her “layered” model of imagination operative in the digital age.

Her starting point, that is, is a familiar interface feature: “these computer programs work in layers, and each layer can be turned on or off, thereby displaying certain information like water pipes, electricity and furniture. A typical CAD software does more than showing perspectives” (194). But she ends up with a theory of “imagination that works in layers and is co-shaped by digital technologies—CAD software, augmented reality apps, or AI’s neural networks. Such technologies lead us to imagine in layers while they provide contents for the layers or suggest links between them. The links they recommend are statistical and hence depend on the data on which the algorithms were trained. Our role as human users is to suggest new layers and extract meaning from the various combinations of layers” (201). This sounds very much like Bogost’s description of a cooperative division of labor between the user and the text-to-image model, where the human provides concepts and the machine helps to imagine them. With respect to AI in particular, Wellner writes that “[t]he layered model of digital imagination translates the imaginative task of AI algorithms as the filling in of the layers with data. By producing endless possibilities, these technologies ‘automate’ the Kantian ‘free play’ of imagination, allowing us to examine more options and focus on the best of them. The logic of AI leaves, however, the production of meaning to humans” (201).

What exactly are these layers? In the case of CAD (or, say, Photoshop), it is quite clear what is meant. But how does this translate to AI? Although machine learning models are routinely described in terms of a set of “layers,” including input, output, and any number of “hidden” layers of artificial neurons, these are of a very different order than the layered software interface. In particular, AI layers and their operations are not visual phenomena whatsoever; they are completely “discorrelated” from subjective perception.⁶ If, as in Bogost’s example, AI tools like DALL-E can be seen as automating operations of the imagination, it is not on account of the hidden layers. In her generalization from a com-

mon interface paradigm to the broad category of the “digital,” it seems that Wellner has turned the idea of the “layer” into a metaphor whose purchase on AI is quite unclear. It almost seems as if “layering” comes to refer to the quasi-hierarchical division of labor between humans and algorithmic systems, according to which meaning is reserved for humans responding and interacting with an automated imagination. But then the layer metaphor would have slipped from its original domain of visual imagination to the *interrelation* between a post-visual imagination and human meaning. It is somewhat unclear whether this “meaning” should be understood, with Bogost, as conceptual (the domain of the Kantian understanding) or aesthetic; Wellner’s reference to the “free play” of imagination would suggest the latter context, but since Kant refers in the *Critique of Judgement* to the “free play of the imagination and understanding,” in characterizing the disinterested pleasure that serves as the basis for a judgement of taste, it is unclear to me how human meaning—whether conceptual or aesthetic—could remain untouched by the imagination’s automation.⁷ And, in fact, such a claim seems quite at odds with Wellner’s overarching Stieglerian historicization of human faculties with respect to material technologies.

Although machine learning models are routinely described in terms of a set of “layers,” including input, output, and any number of “hidden” layers of artificial neurons, these are of a very different order than the layered software interface. In particular, AI layers and their operations are not visual phenomena whatsoever; they are completely “discorrelated” from subjective perception.

Suffice it to say that the layer metaphor introduces more problems than it solves. Nevertheless, I see it as a significant starting point toward a model that responds to a very real transformation in contemporary visuality. That is, the layered interface is indeed part of a more general explosion of the situated “point of view” that Wellner associates with modern optical media. Computational interfaces translate—which is to say, make

6. See Denson, *Discorrelated Images*.

7. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 49 (emphasis added).

available for aesthetic and interactive engagement—categorically invisible operations taking place beyond the surface of the screen. These translations and transactions between the visible and the invisible—rather than the design of a particular user interface—should, I believe, be central in our interrogation of contemporary imagination. In order to understand the significance, in the context of AI, of this more general problem of contemporary images and visibility, we need to return to the Kantian framework to which Wellner is responding and look at how “point of view” arises in relation to the imagination. On this basis, I will offer an alternative to Wellner’s digital imagination that will better support the view that AI-generated images represent an exteriorization of the imagination, or, in Bogost’s words, that they “aren’t images; they’re imagination.”

Kantian Schematism, Computational Images, and Artificial Imagination

I follow Wellner in taking Kant’s analysis of the productive imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) in *Critique of Pure Reason*, and particularly his theory of “schematism,” as a crucial touchstone for any attempt to come to terms with AI and its relation to contemporary imagination. As is well known, Kant’s treatment of the imagination changes rather dramatically between the first and second editions of the first *Critique* (between the A edition of 1781 and the B edition of 1787), as he retreats from his initial theory of a “transcendental imagination” that fundamentally grounds the other two faculties, the sensibility and the understanding, demoting the imagination generally behind the understanding in the later edition. Following (and critically modifying) Heidegger’s commentary on this transformation, Stiegler has argued that the shift in the role of imagination is crucial to understanding the way that Kant’s three syntheses of apprehension in intuition, reproduction in imagination, and recognition in the conceptual understanding all depend on—but fail to account for—a prior transductive operation by which inner and outer senses and images co-operate and make way for subjective experience of time and space.⁸ Importantly, Stiegler’s argument revolves around the mental “schemata” that, according to Kant, the imagination generates from concepts and applies to sensation, thus mediating between the understanding and the intuition. According to Kant, such schemata must be distinguished from concrete images: “the *image* is a product of the empirical faculty of reproductive imagination; the *schema* of sensible concepts, such as of figures in

space, is a product and, as it were, monogram, of pure *a priori* imagination, through which, and in accordance with which, images themselves first become possible.”⁹ Contending instead that concepts, and hence schemata, have histories and are anchored in material and cultural techniques, Stiegler argues that “[i]f the schema can be distinguished from the image, it remains the fact that there can be no manifestation of schema without image, whether mental or not” and that “there can be no *mental* image without an *objective* image” (53). Clearly, this is an important argument in the present context, as it grounds Wellner’s notion of a “co-shaping” of human and machinic imagination—while also suggesting that what is special about AI imagination, as evoked by Bogost, is less the novelty of externalized or “prosthetic” imagination than the novelty of a technique that makes this transductive relation apparent and open for inspection to the subject in the very process of shaping and being shaped by the external image-engine.

As important as this line of thinking is, my argument here will not rely on it or depend in any way on Kant’s revision of the imagination between the two editions of the *Critique*. Instead, I would like to focus on the operation of the schematism, which survives Kant’s revision, and its relation to perspective or point of view. According to Kant, a “schema is in itself always a product of the imagination” (182). More specifically, it is the “representation of a universal procedure of imagination in providing an image for a concept” (182). Kant illustrates with a geometric figure: “No image could ever be adequate to the concept of a triangle in general. It would never attain that universality of the concept which renders it valid of all triangles, whether right-angled, obtuse-angled, or acute-angled; it would always be limited to a part only of this sphere. The schema of the triangle can exist nowhere but in thought. It is a rule of synthesis of the imagination, in respect to pure figures in space” (182). Accordingly, the schema of such a figure has to be indeterminate but determinable—a kind of “latent space” such as is discussed in machine learning contexts, where it refers to an abstract, lower-dimensional representation of more complex, higher-dimensional data (e.g. the multitude of determinate images or text used as training data), capturing the underlying structure of that data and enabling the generation of novel but similarly detailed specimens. Like the latent space of an image-generating AI model, the schema of a triangle cannot be directly observed as it is not yet determined in its concrete imagistic manifestation. As if writing about the “hidden layers” of a cognitive latent space, Kant writes: “This schematism

8. See Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*; Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 3. Further references indicated in the text.

9. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 183. Further references indicated in the text.

of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere form, is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze” (183). We are dealing here with the relation of visibility to invisibility itself.

The stakes and relevance of Kant’s schematism become even more apparent when he turns from the “pure figures” of geometry to those of empirical experience: “Still less is an object of experience or its image ever adequate to the empirical concept; for this latter always stands in immediate relation to the schema of imagination, as a rule for the determination of our intuition, in accordance with some specific universal concept. The concept ‘dog’ signifies a rule according to which my imagination can delineate the figure of a four-footed animal in a general manner, without limitation to any single determinate figure such as experience, or any possible image that I can represent *in concreto*, actually presents” (182-183). Significantly, the generality of the figure described here implies that it is indeterminate with respect to perspective or point of view, but it makes possible perception of concrete instances from virtually any point of view. Thus, whereas Kant writes that “*Imagination* is the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is *not itself present*” (165), it also serves an indispensable role in determining the experience of an object when it is present. In particular, it is responsible for our ability to process the experience of sensing (or intuiting) an object, as an experience of that determinate (conceptually “labeled”) object, and doing so *from a particular point of view*. As the mediator between concepts, by way of perspectiveless schemata, and concrete images or experiences of objects, the imagination is the faculty by which perspective is given to subjective experience.

Philosopher Alan Thomas argues along these lines in an article titled “Perceptual Presence and the Productive Imagination.”¹⁰ The larger context is what Thomas calls the problem of perceptual presence, namely: the problem “of explaining how our perceptual experience of the world gives us a sense of the presence of objects in perception over and above the perceived sensory properties of that object. Objects possess other properties that are phenomenologically present, but sensorily absent” (154). Thomas follows Wilfrid Sellars in offering the example of a red apple, which I can perceive as having a white interior despite only the red exterior being given to sensation. Arguing that this is not a theoretical judgement that is added to perception,

but immediately present to perception itself—I *see it as* having a white inside—Thomas argues that only Kant’s productive imagination (as further elaborated by Sellars) is able to explain such perceptual presence, and that competing accounts tend not even to recognize the problem in the first place. Importantly, Thomas admits that “[t]his sense of presence undoubtedly depends on prior background knowledge that one might, in an extended sense, call ‘theoretical’” (156); without prior experience with apples, I could not perceive it as having a white interior hidden beneath its peel. And it is here, I suggest, that Stiegler’s reminder about the role played by material artifacts and cultural techniques in the formation of concepts and schemata comes into play; but assuming that the perceiver has had the relevant (always technically mediated) experience, then the productive imagination fills out sensation to produce the robust perception I have, which exceeds intuition but does not involve any conceptual deliberation by the understanding. Though Thomas does not discuss this dimension, we can begin to see here how Kant’s view of the imagination can be historicized, even in Stiegler’s strong epiphylogenetic sense, and still remain operative in any given cognitive and cultural-material situation. Writing specifically about the role of schematism, Thomas argues that “[b]ackground theoretical knowledge primes the content of the model [i.e. the schema] that is applied in perception. But there remains a difference between the prompts that cue the operation of the model and that which the model places in perception if its operation succeeds” (160).

It is in this context that Thomas argues for the link between the productive imagination and perceptual perspective, drawing on a provocative claim made by Sartre, writing in his early book *The Imaginary*, about the way that imaginary objects (as opposed to perceived objects) are present to intuition from multiple points of view at once: “Imagined objects are seen from several sides at the same time: or better—for this multiplication of points of view, of sides, does not give an exact account of the imaginative intention—they are ‘presentable’ under an all inclusive aspect” (qtd. in Thomas 162). Sartre further specifies that such imaginary objects—images conjured in the mind of objects absent or unreal—are “not sensible, but rather quasi-sensible things” (125). In the domain of perceptual sensing, in contrast, seeing is always from a determinate point of view. Thomas thus suggests that Sartre’s reflections illuminate the role of schematization in determining perspective in perception: “the idea of that object as being from no particular view *in particular* figures in the explanation of how it appears from the particular point of

10. Thomas, “Perceptual Presence and the Productive Imagination.” Further references indicated in the text.

view that it does in any particular instance” (162). Thus, “Kant seems to take the perspectival feature of perception, the presentation of objects *as from* a point of view, as a feature contributed by the productive imagination” (162). And this explanation is made plausible by the fact that it helps explain how we have perceptual experiences that exceed sensory intuition without resorting to theoretical deliberation: “While the relevant sensorily identified features are present in visual experience, their being taken *as* perspectival, as being from a point of view, is not present in visual experience. Perspectivalness enters into how the features are taken when they are conceptualized and a sensory model applied to them” (162). Accordingly, the productive imagination is essential not only to our perception of things as having unseen insides, but also depth and backsides—for why we see *things* at all rather than a flat, two-dimensional plenum of sense-data.

Wellner seems to make the connection between perspective and productive imagination when she writes: “The reproductive imagination is guided by the productive imagination, which is more fundamental and synthesizes sensory content into a meaningful whole. Put differently, the preference of certain perceptions functions as a filter or point of view from which reality can be perceived” (191). Without explicitly emphasizing the connection between imagination and perspective, Wellner immediately turns to the operation of the schematism and asserts that “this recipe for the imagination is now deployed in AI algorithms” (192). She elaborates: “this type of AI capabilities [*sic*] transforms human imagination so that the human does not need to focus on ‘schematization,’ but rather can concentrate on the invention of new schemes or concepts” (192). But what does it mean to “focus” on schematization? In what sense was this a necessity before that can now be offloaded onto machines? As we have seen, the schematism is, according to Kant, a transcendental condition of experience itself, which in linking sensations with concepts, automatically imposes spatiotemporal determination and point of view. In an important sense, schematism determines subjectivity itself by “placing” the subject with respect to a schematized (one might say “stereotyped”) object. Already automatic, this stereotyping and subjectivizing operation hardly seems like something we would want to (even if we could) relegate to machines, but the connection between schematism and AI does help make sense of “algorithmic bias.” In fact, if we get rid of the idea that the exteriorization or simulation of schematism in any way “frees us up” from anything, I think that we see here the basis for a much more productive idea of artificial imagination, as medi-

ating the conditions of visibility in an age of invisible algorithms, than Wellner’s more limited “layered” model. Importantly, this alternative model will not support a utopian optimism, since the schematism, whether human or artificial, has to be seen not only as an enabling but also a disabling condition: a repository of limiting conceptual biases (or statistical correlations) that determine subjective experience itself.

Sartre’s imaginary object, which is “presentable’ under an all inclusive aspect” beyond any given point of view, provides a useful basis for this alternative model. Sartre’s non-perspectival imagination corresponds closely to Alexander R. Galloway’s description of a new “visual contract” implicit in computational imagery. In his book *Uncomputable*, Galloway distinguishes between photographic and computational “contracts” of visibility, which align with Wellner’s historical epochs of “modern” and “digital imagination” while pointing beyond (but encompassing) the more limited framework of the “layered” interface.¹¹ Essentially, the contracts theorized by Galloway describe the correlative or intentional potentials of different image types, framed in terms of the geometric configurations that they suggest for perceiving subjects and perceived images. “The photographic version of the contract, if it were drawn as a diagram, would resemble a cone splayed outward from an origin point, like a horn. Something of great importance occupies the spot at the tip of the horn, something important like a lens or an aperture or an eyeball or a subject. Starting at the focal point, photographic vision fans out into the world, locating objects in proximal relation to the origin” (52). According to Galloway, the photographic contract is thus a subject-centric or ocularcentric—and clearly perspectival—correlation, which is significantly challenged by computational media and its very different geometry. As he puts it, “computational media has finally impoverished the eye [...]. Indeed, computational vision is also conical, but inverted, more like a funnel with the tip facing away. Here the perceiving subject is not focused into a dense, rich point at the center but diffuses itself outward toward the edge of the space [...]. The object, by contrast, lies at the point of the funnel, receiving all the many inputs issued to it from the perimeter. Thus, if the photographic eye is, as it were, *convex*, then the computational eye is *concave*, flanking and encompassing the world from the fringe” (53). At the heart of this topological inversion from the photographic to the computational lies not an optical but an architectural perspective (with echoes of Ihde’s experiences with CAD), one that emphasizes a volumetric rather than planar conception of the im-

11. Galloway, *Uncomputable*. Further references indicated in the text.

age: “The condition is simple: assume that objects and worlds will be viewable and manipulable from all sides in multiple dimensions” (53).

What is crucial here is not the layers that can be turned on and off, though this minimal interactivity and modifiability of the visual object is not unimportant. More important, however, is the way that it is subject to global transformations, transpositions, and translations—and the way that these changes relate to an invisible infrastructure upon which they depend but are also capable of modifying. CAD is a good example. Design may be done from any number of perspectives—frontal, side, top-down—but the computer is storing a model from all sides, which it can display in a “fly-through” animation. Somewhat more radically, a self-driving car scans the environment with its many cameras and sensors, building and updating just such a model—a model of the streets, buildings, crosswalks, and other relevant objects as seen from all possible angles. But this model is only liminally visual in the first place, as the input from video cameras and LIDAR sensors is translated immediately into mathematical form and operated on by AI. The artificial intelligence is responsible for stitching together the various views into a dynamic photogrammetric model, similar to the multidimensional objects and environments that can be navigated in a virtual environment such as a videogame or VR scenario. But the car’s supraperspectival model of the environment is never even seen by human eyes, save when an engineer tinkers with it or a visualization is made for testing or marketing purposes. And this brings us to generative AI, such as the text-to-image models that Bogost writes about. For their human users, such tools are all about visualization, about generating images from a particular perspective, but at root they are built on multidimensional models that exceed visual regard at all.

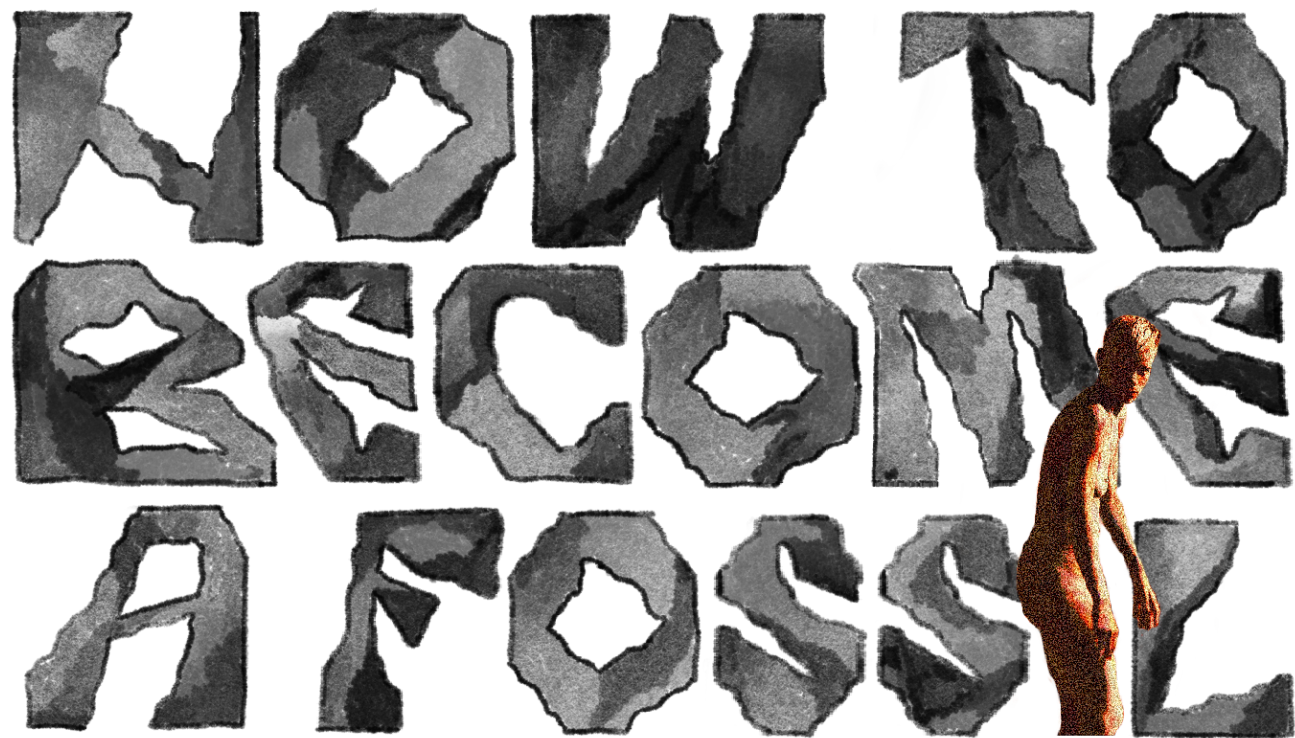
If, following Thomas, we can see Sartre’s imaginary object as an approximation of a Kantian schema, then we are in a position to see computational images—including not only layered interfaces but also the invisible (for humans) operational images that are produced by self-driving cars or the latent spaces of AI models—as embodying an exteriorized form of imagination. These are schemata that enable and constrain the production of concrete images today, and they therefore exercise an inestimable power in determining what, today, there is to be seen. I therefore concur with Wellner that the conditions of the imagination have changed, and the perspectival qualities of optical technologies have been

superseded, with the advent of digital imaging systems, but I do not think that “layering” gets at the essence of these changes. And while I have argued independently of Stiegler, I believe this view of a new epoch of artificial imagination supports his claims about the transductive relations between imagination and technicity, or between schemata and concrete images. Whether we rely on generative AI to imagine things or not, we live in a world conditioned by these artificial schemata, where not only the images we see on screens are likely to have been “imagined” by artificial agents, but also the very environments that we navigate by car or on foot are being automatically mapped and modeled, turned into schemata for machines that will likely never reveal how they see the world. This has important consequences for the points of view that I can (virtually *and* physically) occupy, what I can see or what I can imagine.

Importantly, as we have seen, automaticity has always been a part of the imagination, but now our visual stereotyping of the world is problematically shared with artificial agents. To impute imagination to them is not to pay them a compliment, and it does not imply that AI models have subjectivity. Sartre’s theory of imagination is written explicitly from the point of view of ego-less experience; Kant’s theory, too, can be seen in terms of a mechanical, certainly nonconscious operation. Imagination is a necessary condition for perception and subjectivity, but it is hardly sufficient, and perhaps we have simply expected too much from it in romanticizing it as a condition of humanity. Maybe it is such a condition, but not by means of being within our conscious control as a power of creative autonomy. Sellars has foregrounded the algorithmic nature of the imagination as “a unique blend of a capacity to form images in accordance with a recipe, and a capacity to conceive of objects in a way which supplies the relevant recipes” (qtd. in Thomas 163). As Thomas elaborates, “a schema is [...] both *produced by*, and is *a rule for*, the imagination” (163). The imagination, in other words, has always been a kind of latent space that both expresses and grounds our technically conditioned positioning within the world. Now that we have begun constructing systems that exteriorize these processes, that process visual data to produce imagistically indeterminate schemata that in turn serve as recipes or rules for the production of novel constraints of perspective and vision, we will have to take responsibility for—which is to say: recognize the deeply political and contestable nature of—our artificial imaginations.

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Towards a Multispecies Future

By Stephanie Kang

I. Introduction

Founded in 2010 by Lauren Boyle, Solomon Chase, Marco Roso, and David Toro, the collaborative project DIS began as a satirical lifestyle magazine that broke down current events and critical theories through a humorous, yet accessible language. Since then, the creative collective has expanded its practice, producing cinematic videos and installations that question what the future looks like for humanity. In 2018, it inaugurated a streaming platform, called *dis.art*, that uses entertainment as a means of education, a method of public outreach that DIS dubs “edutainment.” By incorporating recognizable entertainment and social media sources into its educational practices, DIS creates platforms that allow its audiences to critically reflect on the state of the world and its current crises. In its 2021 video *Everything But The World*, which can best be described as part historical documentary and part science fiction, DIS and its collaborators look back on lineages of human progress to call the very notion of “history” itself into question.

The opening scene of *Everything But The World* begins with a long shot of a vast and desolate desert. As the camera slowly zooms onto a mesa, a naked human becomes discernible as the only moving object within the landscape. Her body, covered and caked with dried mud, is camouflaged to replicate the arid desert in its textured materiality. The video intentionally does not provide any clues regarding her whereabouts, both temporally and geographically. Its setting seemingly exists out of time, making it uncertain whether she is meant to reside in a prehistoric past or an apocalyptic future. As she slowly travels across the barren landscape in a desperate search for shelter, the camera captures footage of a bird, an antelope, and a lone tumbleweed similarly traversing the environment. Like the human, they move from one edge of the desert to the other with no clear motivation beyond their own survival in mind. Through these visual juxtapositions, *Everything But The World* highlights the parallel movements between the human, animals, and foliage, insinuating that they are not so different from one another. By refusing existing narratives that

designate humans as the protagonists of global history, *Everything But The World* moves beyond an anthropocentric framework to reimagine the end of the world through the lens of a multispecies future.

While the first scene of *Everything But The World* seemingly takes place outside of the contemporary moment, the following clips incorporate the language of new media, including social media livestreams and online tutorials, to reframe the future, not as a utopian venture, but as a complex interplay between the past, present, and future. Lacking a clear, linear narrative, the video jumps between vignettes of a YouTube tutorial, a legal report, an archeological tour, and a daily vlog. While these scenes may seem like



DIS, Everything But The World, 2021. Courtesy of the artists.

they present disparate and unrelated stories, the video's narrator, voiced by the filmmaker Leilah Weinraub, uses quippy interjections that create clear throughlines within the video's critiques of humanity. For example, returning to its first scene, the human eventually settles in a location and struggles to build a small fire as the narrator exasperatedly states, "They always imagined that they were history's favorite customer...And then they died. Unforgiven. Dust. Dust."

Through the video's unusual and at times humorous narratives, *DIS* poses the following questions: how can we imagine radical alternative ways of living in the twenty-first century, a time in which a livable future seems potentially implausible? And what might a future that refuses to prioritize human survival look like? Rather than denouncing death and decay, which turn humans from living subjects into lifeless

things, *Everything But The World* proposes a new vision for the future, one in which humans can rescind their place on their planet and embrace a state of thing-ness. By adopting a stance that embodies what political theorist Jane Bennett calls "thing-power," the characters in *Everything But The World* allow all things to coexist as an interconnected web of "vibrant matter" (Bennett 3), de-hierarchizing the categories that separate the human from the nonhuman and the living from the nonliving. Essentially, if anthropocentric and presentist worldviews can only predict dystopian futures of economic precarity, climate crisis, and global warfare, then perhaps it is time to embrace the liberatory power of humanity's end. Rather than presenting this futural projection as a pessimistic outlook on the world, *Everything But The World* reframes thing-ness as a new means of multispecies connection that is worth consideration and celebration.

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II. The Power of Fossilization

Everything But The World's introductory scene is followed by a sequence that features a how-to channel hosted by Branch and Banter, fictional characters that are played by the artist duo Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch. Known for their multilinear narratives that mirror the frenetic nature of online culture, the longtime collaborators construct filmic worlds that host a peculiar cast of characters with fragmented and fluid identities. Playing upon the ironic and the unnerving, their works present a distorted reflection of reality that exposes the psychological effects of the contemporary condition. Recently, Trecartin and Fitch decided to return to their Midwestern roots, replacing their Los Angeles

locale with a 32-acre homestead outside of Athens, Ohio, which includes everything from a traditional farmhouse to a lazy river (that when empty can serve as a skate park). Since purchasing the property, they have worked with several artists and creators, like Telfar, Jesse Hoffman, and DIS, to create projects set in this rural environment. For *Everything But The World*, Trecartin and Fitch were specifically asked by DIS to contribute a scene to the video that parodies humanity's attempts at apocalyptic preparation.

In the video, the two “de-extinction enthusiasts” Branch and Banter give viewers a tour of the expansive farmlands. They roam about the property as they tend to the land, feed the cows, and gather chicken eggs. Filmed with a selfie-stick, the shaky camera movements give the scene a makeshift quality that contrasts the cinematic nature of the previous segment. Yet the amateur approach to filmmaking with fourth-wall breaks, aimless ramblings, and seemingly improvised conversations, intentionally mimics the familiar tropes of a YouTube vlog, which documents the creator's daily activities as they provide a commentary to their followers. Mirroring the language and actions of an Internet influencer, they meander throughout the farmlands and speak into the camera, directly addressing their audiences. After introducing themselves and welcoming viewers to their channel, they proudly announce the purpose of the video, stating, “This is your wake repurposed as a How To Channel.” Lauren Boyle, one of the creators of DIS, describes the characters of Branch and Banter as “preppers,” who are getting ready for a catastrophic disaster (Hindahl and Boyle). However, rather than stockpiling on weapons, food, and other supplies needed for survival, they attempt to teach their followers “how to become a fossil.”

Looking into the camera, Branch asks his viewers, “Do you really, really want to survive?” Through this pointed question, the paleontological influencer reorients the question of “how do you survive” to “do you want to survive,” insinuating that the future can (and perhaps must) be reimagined without humans. This point is further stressed by several shots of excavated human remains that are intercut with Branch's monologue. Through these montaged images of unearthed bones, *Everything But The World*

visualizes the inevitable fate of all living things that die and eventually transform into fossilized matter. The duo then proceeds to spout off a series of questionable facts, celebrating the possibilities of “fossil hood” as they call it. They use words like “thing” and “timeless” as positive descriptors of the fossil, encouraging their audiences to rescind their identities as humans and give in to the thing-ness of fossilization. In doing so, they reject human-centered projections for the future, suggesting that becoming a fossil isn't something that should be feared but welcomed.

Branch and Banter illustrate how reimagining the future requires a radical restructuring of all anthropological categories, which separate the human, animal, and object based on a hierarchical scale. According to anthropologist Alfred Gell, objects, like fossils, contain a social agency that allows them to be seen as more than just lifeless, dead things; they can have significant social relationships and power roles (123). Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed also emphasizes that these subject-object relationships are far from neutral, noting the potential for their reorientation. By exploring interactive distinctions between the subject and the object (for example, one's relationship to a table or a couch), she contends that a new politics of “disorientation” or “queer phenomenology” can disrupt the existing social relations that limit a human's ability to interact and engage with other entities in the world (Ahmed 54). In *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, gender theorist Mel Y. Chen builds upon Ahmed's theory on queer phenomenology, while also critiquing how it upholds the dichotomy between the deadened, inanimate object and the living, animate subject. Problematizing categories that separate the human from the animal or object, they ask, “What is lost when we hold tightly to that exceptionalism which says that couches are dead and we are live? For would not my nonproductivity, my nonhuman sociality, render me some other human's ‘dead’?” (Chen 210). In their work, Chen emphasizes that these viewpoints that prioritize human exceptionalism are no longer viable or worth promoting when attempting to produce new and more equitable outlooks for the future.

In their instructional video, Branch and Banter reorient these social relations towards an alternative methodology that questions the

boundaries between the human and the fossil. Rather than trying to hold onto the human's position as the prioritized living being, they embrace the fluidity of a material nature, which continually fluctuates in its molecular form and status. In doing so, they emphasize the limitations of anthropocentric thinking, which defines "who" or "what" is bestowed the designation of human. To help break down these categories, the following segments of *Everything But The World* provide glimpses into humanity's constant searches for progress, highlighting not only the insignificance of human civilizations but the cataclysmic harm that they have caused throughout history.

III. The Failures of Human Progress

For centuries, fantasies of a new future have emphasized the role of human progress, whether it might be scientific, technological, or moralistic. For example, in his book *After the Future*, political theorist and media activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi looks to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* as an emblem of these ideals. Published in 1909, the same year that Henry Ford first initiated the use of the assembly line in his Detroit automobile factory, the *Futurist Manifesto* outlines eleven points that celebrate the advents of industrialization, one of which states, "We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath...a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Berardi 21). Under these modernist notions of progress, the cultic value placed on speed reoriented the machine as the model of productivity, causing labored time to be accelerated towards its maximum operations. As a result, human bodies became synchronized, both physically and psychically, to the machine's continuous, uninterrupted work rate. Describing these conditions as a "24/7 environment," art historian Jonathan Crary argues that it "has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness" (9). Essentially, while futurists like Marinetti

idolized machinic speed as the marker of human advancement, it has in actuality perpetuated harmful systems of exploitation.

Additionally, capitalist modes of accelerated production and consumption have resulted in dire ecological conditions, a reality that was emphasized by David Spratt and Ian Dunlop, members of the National Centre for Climate Restoration, when they observed, "Climate change is now reaching the end-game where very soon humanity must choose between taking unprecedented action, or accepting that it has been left too late and bear the consequences" (3). In short, the world is currently undergoing a crisis, in which the planet may no longer be able to withstand the harmful effects of the Anthropocene. However, in *Beyond the World's End*, art historian T.J. Demos questions current conceptions of apocalyptic disaster, particularly its presentist assumptions. He writes, "Current fears of the world's end are...importantly contextualized by Indigenous voices that view them as a mode of settler anxiety, haunted by those centuries-old histories of colonial violence, climate-changing brutality, and genocide-directed militarism—forces that have long disrupted fragile ecologies integral to native lifeworlds and continue to do so in the present" (9). He continues, "Much the same could be said of the world-ending, and equally world-transforming, event of the centuries-long transatlantic slave trade for those of African descent" (Demos 10). As Demos argues, many worlds have already undergone many ends under the violence of colonialism, militarism, and capitalism. Therefore, pursuing misguided hopes for the future and its continual progress has resulted in humanity's ultimate failure—the destruction of the planet and its inhabitants.

In *Everything But The World*, DIS and its collaborators represent the dangers of capitalist exploitation and how they create anti-social attitudes of complacency that prioritize the human, and more specifically the self, above all else. In one of the video's final scenes, a "zoomer" records herself engaging in one of the contemporary period's most innocuous tasks—waiting in a drive-through line. At the beginning of the segment, she switches the video's viewpoint to a vertical portrait mode, indicating that she is recording and sharing the video for her social

media followers, an assumption that is further verified as she poses for the camera, rolling her eyes and sticking out her tongue. She speaks directly to her audience, sharing her frustrations about the long wait at the White Castle. While she attempts to assuage her boredom, she records the facade of the White Castle, zooming onto its illuminated logo and “Open 24 Hours” sign.

Yet when she finally drives up to the speaker box and tries to place her order, a White Castle employee named Mark interrupts her, beginning a three-minute-long monologue that holds her hostage in the line. Clearly alarmed and made uncomfortable by this bizarre interaction, she looks around in confusion, attempting to still place her order despite the employee’s disinterest. Speaking over the customer, Mark continues to rant to her about the existential crises that are currently facing humanity, saying, “The invention of the clock was the origin of wage labor but only some people had access to time. They controlled it and manipulated time. Isn’t that how they snatch your time and space up under you?” As he delves further and further into his diatribe, the camera

slowly zooms onto the speaker box, insinuating a connection between the technological apparatus and Mark’s disembodied voice. His speech is then juxtaposed with montaged clips of faceless White Castle employees frantically taking food out of the fryers, flipping sliders on the grill, bagging up orders, and counting money from the register. By speaking extensively on topics of time, labor, and colonialism to the customer at the drive-through, he forcibly slows down the assembly line of the fast-food industry, reversing capitalist power roles between the worker and the buyer.

DIS, Everything But The World, 2021. Courtesy of the artists.

Designating himself as the “god” of the drive-through, Mark orders his captive audience to consider contemporary time constraints, which are organized around these histories of capitalist exploitation. Describing this scene as a confrontation of “time denialism,” DIS member Lauren Boyle explains how these modernist notions of speed and constant productivity have become ingrained



DIS, Everything But The World, 2021. Courtesy of the artists.

into neoliberal structures that organize our world, making them dependent on constant economic growth and consumption (Hindahl and Boyle). However, rather than creating a route to a liberatory future for humans as futurists like Marinetti had once hoped, the cult of speed bound us within its systems. Modernist modes of constant productivity have thus been weaponized towards a vision for the future that is centered on inescapable cycles of capitalist manipulation and colonialist warfare. As Mark poignantly articulates to his befuddled audience, “White settler colonialism gave birth to the industrial revolution, which sowed the seeds of why we have drive-through restaurants in the first place.”

However, rather than creating a route to a liberatory future for humans as futurists like Marinetti had once hoped, the cult of speed bound us within its systems. Modernist modes of constant productivity have thus been weaponized towards a vision for the future that is centered on inescapable cycles of capitalist manipulation and colonialist warfare.

It is important to note though that humans are not the only ones affected by these processes. As the camera zooms into the illuminated menu advertising White Castle’s chicken rings, Mark announces that 32 billion chickens are killed daily for human consumption. Voicing his frustrations through the speaker box, he declares, “In a million years, the last lasting fossil records will be chicken bones. Future archeologists will find like ka-trillion-billion chicken bones everywhere and be like ‘what the fuck?’ These people were godless savages.” While Branch and Banter previously described fossilization as a means of liberation, Mark’s empathy for the millions of chickens that he is forced to prepare for human consumption also raises a question regarding agency in the transition from living being to deadened object.

Essentially, who is given the choice to become a fossil and who is forced into this category of thing-ness? In this scene, *Everything But The World* reveals how harmful modes of capitalist production have made “thing-power” seem undesirable to the human mind. However, through characters like Branch and Banter, who praise the possibilities of fossilization, and the unnamed narrator, who continuously roasts the failures of humanity, DIS and its collaborators allow new imaginative potentials of thing-ness to emerge.

IV. Conclusion

In the final scenes of *Everything But The World*, the video’s narrator concludes her assessment of humanity, stating, “Ok, it’s weird that I’m even covering sapiens. They weren’t that famous. Check the ratings. The humans weren’t a disaster, they were a whimper, a hardly audible sneeze.” In *Everything But The World*, DIS proposes that desolation and death do not lead down the path of no future, as one might be led to believe; rather, they can become platforms for renewal. By reimagining thing-ness as a source of radical power, the video demonstrates that the future is not just a human-centered project, but one that demands justice for all living and nonliving entities alike. As the creators of DIS state, “If we realize that this is not *the* world, but a world among many possible, what worlds might we see come, after the end?” (DIS). Through its worldbuilding projects, DIS reorients hope for the future towards de-hierarchical connections and interplanetary equity, bringing the elsewhere of a new future one step closer into view.

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RE-THINKING NEOLIBERALISM, MASS CULTURE, AND AESTHETIC IMPERIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

By Orrin Pavone

Commodification appropriates uniqueness, transforming the individual into a quantifiable object of production: it ensures that all objects, personal or otherwise, remain identical. Under the regime of capital, difference is a commodity that operationalizes mass culture; difference is the desired object of capital. Difference does not dissolve with each iteration but rather forms a new shape. It repurposes minutiae to ensure that “something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape” (Adorno and Horkheimer 97) mass culture. This equalization of difference, ultimately, ends with the replication of the subject, or the self, under neoliberalism. The labouring body, the site of production and consumption, becomes only an object of commercial exchange, suturing the personal to the professional. Commodification, inherently, ruptures any attempt to distinguish work from play.

In his essay *The Schema of Mass Culture*, Theodor Adorno describes the effects of late-stage capitalism on mass culture in the mid-twentieth century. Adorno asserts mass culture's commercial character is symptomatic of capitalist economic decay, especially when concerned with the commodification of the working-class subject (62). He equates the commercial character of

mass culture to that of a solution which erodes the distinction between culture and practical life (ibid). The commercial character of (mass) culture is, therefore, an apparatus of state capitalism: a control mechanism for the behaviours of the working class. It adjoins disparate leisure activities to labour, inviting capital into the interior spaces of the working-class subject: the *self*. In effect, the commercial character of mass culture commodifies the self, subjugating the individual to a framework of production present both inside and outside of the traditional domains of labour. The internal becomes an external site of labour commodification. In other words, the subject consumes as a means of production. This behaviour is prototypical to, and now a hallmark of, contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Fundamentally, neoliberal capitalism requires the sublimation of individuals into proprietary interests. Neoliberalism indentures individuals to capital and refashions them into autonomous economic units: the body itself becomes a self-sustaining economic apparatus (Shaviro 3). The neoliberal subject is, hence, an embodied object or resource of capital. Michel Foucault explains in his book *The Birth of Biopolitics* that neoliberalism mutates the theory of Homo oeconomicus so

"Homo oeconomicus is an entrepreneur [of] himself" (Foucault 226; Shaviro 3). In this sense, the contemporary neoliberal subject adopts a model of consumption that tethers production to consumption, thereby making the self its own site of capital, labour, and source of earnings (Foucault 226). Divided, the neoliberal subject exists as a function of themselves, dependent on their labour as a form of consumption and their consumption as a form of generative labour (ibid).

Under the regime of neoliberal capitalism, emotions are not exempt from exploitation. Emotions are, instead, considered resources that allow individuals to make renewable investments and expand their market shares. Subjects are nevertheless caught in a scheme of non-affective labour politics involving the sale of their "labour-power in the form of pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions" (ibid). This hyper-fixation on the neoliberal exchange of affect defines the behaviours of the main characters, or 'Jennies', in Ryan Trecartin's 2013 film *Center Jenny*. Operating as autonomous economic units, Trecartin depicts each Jenny as an exaggerated, proto-cyborgian replica of the other. All of whom are collectively suffering from a pervasive form of internalized neoliberalism, whose gestures and personae necessarily interpolate the excess(iveness) of early 2010s reality-TV shows (Åkervall 43). Consequently, these characters simultaneously embody what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe as the 'pseudo-individuality' or universalization of the individual in mass culture, and what Sianne Ngai terms the zany: an aesthetic category that describes the "hyper commodified, information saturated, performance driven conditions of late capitalism" (Ngai 1).

In this essay, I therefore attempt to explain the outcome of this regression of person/objecthood, or the material self, under contemporary neoliberal capitalism through what I theorize is *Anti-aesthetic imperialism*. Anti-aesthetic imperialism demarcates a form of deception performed by alternative objects to reappropriate the aesthetics of dissonance as a harmonized marketing technique rather than counter-hegemonic defiance. It defines the process of the alternative object's subsumption into the realm of neoliberal capitalism at the site of affective labour *par excellence*: the neoliberal individual subject. I specifically use the term imperialism to emphasize the violent exertion of political-economic power over alternative objects as they are repurposed into the capitalist domain. Imperialism, understood as a mode of western political and



Figure 1. *Centre Jenny*, Ryan Trecartin (2013)

economic hegemony, most aptly describes a similar violent process to that of anti-aesthetic amalgamation. The abstraction of an alternative object is, therefore, situated in a similar cultural hegemonic realm as imperialism in relation to the continuous subjugation, or exertion of power over objects. Anti-aesthetic imperialism can be thought of as an aesthetic *regime* of sorts, denoting the establishment of an aesthetic hegemony over culturally dissonant objects. In other words, it describes how the institutional use of dissonant aesthetics can maintain ideological control over counter-cultural objects while naturalizing, and universalizing, aesthetic appearance(s). Anti-aesthetic imperialism, hence, violently appropriates the performance(s) of counter-cultural objects to exert political and economic domination over all areas of aesthetic expression. I, thus, explore anti-aesthetic imperialism as neoliberalism's fortified "instrument of power and self-mastery" (Adorno and Horkheimer 28) to argue how it celebrates its ability to accommodate the negative aspects of life under capitalism, reducing the total weight of capital to a mere aesthetic category: anti-aesthetic imperialism teases the avant-garde, counter-hegemonic aesthetics of dissonance with a hyper-awareness of its own visual expressions of self-reflexivity.

Anti-aesthetic imperialism, however, is not an end in itself. Rather, I argue the hyper-commodification of difference does not negate our interpretations of, or engagements with, alternative media nor does it render their expressions meaningless. I emphasize that alternative objects retain their meanings insofar as audiences engage with their inconspicuous superficial expressions in the post-cinematic digital era. To this end, I seek to answer the question: Is Post-cinema a way out of anti-aesthetic imperialism?

This paper, thus, considers how the current hyper-fixated demand for newness encourages neoliberal mass culture to be "an organized mania for connecting

everything with everything else" (Adorno 83). I primarily examine the theoretical work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Siegfried Kracauer on mass culture, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's discussions on connexionism, Mark Fisher's capitalist realism, and the so-called new form of homo-œconomicus theorized by Michel Foucault. The material media objects I analyzed alongside these theories include: Ryan Trecartin's film *Centre Jenny* (2013), the promotional editorial photographs from the recent Heaven by Marc Jacobs FW2022 and SS2023 collections, Shygirl's music video *Playboy / Positions* (2023), the photography of Moni Haworth for THE FACE Magazine, and the runway pieces of designer Victor Barragán. I, thus, situate contemporary counter-hegemonic alternative objects in relation to the appropriation of dissonance-as-marketing-technique to elucidate the ubiquity of anti-aesthetic imperialism in mass culture.

In 2012, Ryan Trecartin began his self-titled Artforum article with the statement: "Production may really just be a creative way to thoughtfully consume" (Trecartin). Throughout his short essay, Trecartin theorizes the prosumer as an embodied form of capital where the act of childbirth exemplifies a natural prosumerism, a complex system of consumption and collaboration. "Trecartin suggests "in a very neutral and cute sense, nothing can be consumed without something being altered, produced, or shared. Creation and consumption are zodiac opposites: polar ends of the same attribute" (ibid). This inter-connective tissue of consumption-production characterizes a phenomenon unique to contemporary mass culture: the exhaustion of the individual under neoliberal capitalism. Our current hyper-fixated demand for newness encourages neoliberal mass culture to be "an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else" (Adorno 83). Reflecting on Adorno's discussions on the mania of mass culture, I am reminded of a similar mania defined in part by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's work on connexionism.

In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the authors explain in a connexionist world "the distinction between private life and professional life tends to diminish under the impact of [a confusion] between the qualities of the person and the properties of their labour power" (Boltanski and Chiapello 155). This con-

1. Prosumer is a portmanteau of 'producer' and 'consumer'. It defines the experiences of individuals who both produce and consume, and is often associated with the amalgamation of production and consumption activities under neoliberalism.

fusion describes what I consider to be an internalized prosumerism, engaging with a new form of homo-œconomicus which expands on the theorizations of Foucault and is found, visually mediated on, by Trecartin. Borderless, the processes of neoliberal capitalism (once internalized) hyper-fixate on the individual as an inexhaustible apparatus of capital accumulation. In understanding the neoliberal body-as-capital Sianne Ngai underscores how the role of the prosumer operates on an axiom of production. This is an axiom whereby, as the sphere of production expands, so do workers' expectations. In this sense, neoliberalism ultimately requires the worker to adopt the "grotesque metarole [that contains] all 'roles' [indifferent] to their individual specificity" (Ngai 202). This amalgamated metarole, I suggest, explains the hyper-excessive behaviours performed by the Jennies in Trecartin's film.

What's interesting about Trecartin's observations are not, necessarily, the fact that we have been told, once again, we're caught in a never-ending cycle of production and consumption. Rather, what I find novel about this article is the idea that creation and consumption can be understood as, inherently, polar opposites: they exist on the same spectrum if only to balance the other out. Considering this theorization from an explicitly Adornian aesthetic standpoint one can productively think of creation and consumption as taking on similar aspects to that of expression and semblance. In this sense, creation can be equated to expression and consumption to semblance. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, that "expression and semblance are fundamentally antithetical" (110), they are therefore opposite yet must invoke the existence of one another in order to function. Put another way, they are counter-counter parts; they depend on each other if only to try to eliminate their existences. A fundamental dialectical tension underlies their relationship; and hence, the relationship Trecartin's aesthetics and cinematic form have to the post-cinematic (read: digital) moving-image.

Centre Jenny, therefore, emphasizes the dialectical tension inherent to aesthetic expression and semblance to categorically reject facile mutations of its subject matter. There is an autonomy affixed to post-cinematic digital expression that does not exist elsewhere in cinema. Trecartin's depictions of his characters hence operate in an aesthetics of dissonance unique to our current digital sensorium. In invoking the aesthetics of non-semblance, Trecartin's treatment of the Jennies formal, material and subjective, aesthetics illu-

minate the “desire suppressed by the affirmative power of society with which aesthetic semblance has been bound up” (ibid). Figures 1, 2, and 8 effectively illustrate Trecartin’s inclination to invoke dissonance as a critical anti-aesthetic and resistant practice. This practice materializes through the non-semblance of self-reflexive overlapping dialogue, quasi-identical wardrobe, and a-human proto-cyborgian coloured contacts and vibrant hair colours. These aesthetic choices translate similarly to the non-linearity of, and overlapping editing structure Trecartin adopts. In this sense, the fragmented images, abstracted hyper-pitched non-human robot-voices, and bass-boosted anxiety-inducing sonic landscape postures audiences towards the dialectical tension underlying post-cinematic expression and Trecartin’s rejection of the semblance character of traditional film and video. It is this form of dissonance, and expression thereof, which is in danger of being appropriated and reproduced under our contemporary aesthetic regime.

In a similar way, author Wes Hill describes Trecartin’s characters as comic-tragic figures of neoliberalism, imbued with an over-connected and over-emotional self-presentation “unable to stop, in fear they will be nothing if not performing” (13). This inability to cease production underscores the violent ramifications of a mass culture acculturated by a prosumerism intent on “competitive individualism” (ibid), a form of self-cannibalization inherent to our current phase of mass culture. Neoliberal hegemony has reached a point of standardization where the individual and their subjectivities converge in mass acculturation. This can be explained by the radical behaviours of the Jennies as themselves evolving from the “mutations of a single worldview” (Koestnbaum in Hill 13); a pattern where characters replicate the behaviours of mass culture to illustrate their existence as “productive spectacles” (Åkervall 44) of internalized neoliberal desire. These spectacular behaviours, thus, mirror our culture of pro/consumerism as they manipulate excess and exaggerate affect through the self-reflexive neoliberal apparatus I define as *Anti-aesthetic imperialism*.

I, however, would first like to emphasize the critical similarities between Trecartin’s Jennies and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s notion of pseudo-individuality before expanding on anti-aesthetic imperialism as such. Adorno and Horkheimer note in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the culture industry tolerates individuals insofar as their identity remains a product of the universal (124). The pseudo-individuality

of those persons under monopoly capitalism reduces the peculiarity of the self to a “socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural” (125). Individuality is, therefore, reduced to minor transgressions of difference such as the presence of one’s accent or facial hair growth (ibid). No one is spared from this phenomenon, neither the film stars nor the working-classes.



Figure 2. *Centre Jenny*, Ryan Trecartin (2013)

Adorno and Horkheimer consider pseudo-individuality as the residual effect of advertising from the culture industry. In this sense, pseudo-individuality is a form of mimesis, or capital-driven replication. In practice, pseudo-individuality is otherwise considered the “compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities” (136) who are aware of the universalizing effects of capital, though continue to behave according to the culture industry’s proprietary interests. Hence, if we are to read the Jennies’ performances as mimicking the “exhibitionism of twenty-first-century reality TV” (Åkervall 36), then their excessive behaviours follow Shaviro’s concept of the pop culture figure as being an ‘ideal commodity’ under neoliberalism. The Jennies, thus, represent what I argue is a pseudo-individuality-centred neurosis, or the symptom of one’s relentless participation in neoliberal capitalism. Adorno moreover explains how the commercial character of culture, a cultural quality I understand to merge the personal and the professional, obscures the “borderline between culture and empirical reality” (61) to the point of indistinction (ibid). It does so in perpetuity and is properly understood as concerning the replicative process of abstraction. I define abstraction as the material result of mass culture’s incessant adoption of capitalist excess, characterized by the insatiable fetish for unbridled growth, demanding nothing which is (re)produced becomes new. Abstraction subjugates the working class to an object of mass-produced capital, modelled on the need to satisfy mass culture’s demand that “no one can be any different from itself” (Adorno and Horkheimer

92). Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer observes in *The Mass Ornament* how early twentieth-century capitalism engaged with and was thus defined by a certain abstract quality. Ergo, the abstract qualities of capitalist thought emphasizes a form of capital(ism) dependent on the processes of abstraction, or undue replication, to sustain the mechanical nature of the commodity (81). Kracauer asserts how the limits of abstraction are identified by its inability to grasp the "actual substance of life" (ibid) and must inevitably, by way of ineptitude, "give way to concrete observation of phenomena" (ibid). The inability of abstraction, the primary faculty of capitalism, to generate objects or commodities *sui generis* connects its purpose to the rapacious desire to fulfill the never-ending lacuna of capitalist production.

More recently, Mark Fisher notes in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, that the phenomenon of newness, or new objects, under neoliberal capitalism exists in tandem with the pre-established object. The new object defines itself with what has been previously established, while at the same time, the established reconfigures itself against the new (Fisher 2). This interdependent dynamic elucidates the antagonisms that underlie newness and the fallacies thereof in neoliberal capitalist epochs. Capitalism's desire for what is new aligns with the incessant need for market expansion, invariably exhausting production practices so that all new materials are subsumed in a regeneration process: the making new of existing materials (17). This falsified production of newness, however, is itself not novel but instead defines the *raison d'être* of neoliberal capitalist regimes. The continuous movement, the re-creation through destruction, relates to capitalism's intolerance of the new as being unreliable. This risk daunts the balance sheets of even the most financially secure venture capitalists. Despite this, the cardinal sin of neoliberal capitalism is not taking this risk. Neoliberalism, as a political-economic regime, problematizes the relation of the new to the old (or pre-established) in an effort to sustain its project of regeneration. The exclusion of the new which defined the epoch of late liberalism that Adorno and Horkheimer wrote from re-asserts itself in contemporary neoliberalism as an ever-perverse form of market expansion. Neoliberal individualism, the site of prosumerism, thus locates in itself the ceaseless production of difference.

In retaliation to mid-century liberal market capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest "the less the system tolerates anything new, the more those who

have been forsaken must be acquainted with all the latest novelties if they are to continue living in society rather than feeling themselves excluded from it" (83). In other words, we can understand how the anxieties inherent to post-1980s neoliberal capitalism culminate in an antagonistic relationship that secures the threat of exclusion to individual production. In this sense, the subject's interiority retains, at any given moment, an ambient threat of exclusion. The internalization of naturalized prosumer logic is an insidiously affective phenomenon; I can, therefore, only define the embodiment of capital-induced stress as a symptom of neoliberal neurosis. This pervasive threat of exclusion is what fastens prosumers, the neoliberal subjects *par excellence*, in an endless state of production and consumption; a value-added model that removes overhead costs from corporations and redirects them to subjects themselves ("Prosumer Business Model"; Fisher 2). Put differently, the "machine is rotating on the spot" (Adorno and Horkheimer 106) insofar as "nothing is allowed to stay as it was; everything must be endlessly in motion" (ibid) under neoliberal capitalism. The endlessness which defines our current phase of mass culture and schema of prosumerism doubly emphasizes the disingenuity of the novel object as itself a pre-made artifact. The neoliberal apparatus has, in effect, dissolved difference to the extent that there is no longer what we have long considered an 'alternative object', neither as a designated media category or a facet of autonomous decision-making. Neoliberalism subsumes the counter-hegemonic and restructures it as a vehicle for liberal progressiveness. Now more than ever, the resistant object transforms into a mere performance of counter-hegemony, allowing consumerism to mutate into the most novel 'progressive' form. The Amazon storefront selling sustainability-branded merchandise with political slogans calling for the end of environmental catastrophe, such as "There is No Planet B", demonstrates these self-reflexive strategies of neoliberal capitalism quite well.

Classifying media objects into frivolous subcategories or subgenres similarly perpetuates the overwhelming fallacy of newness in neoliberal society. Relegating an object to a subcategory is an act of subjugation itself; it is the exclusion of an object based on the ambiguity or indistinction newness requires. Fisher notes that categorizing objects as alternative or independent no longer refers to those outside mass culture or the mainstream. However, instead, they exist as "styles, in fact

the dominant styles, within the mainstream" (Fisher 6). The category of the Alternative, once championed as a vector for resistance, is nevertheless subsumed in mass culture as a savvy marketing technique. Mass culture, therefore, learns from the Alternative what it is deficient in and what supplements to take to remedy this self-included malady. Similar to the contemporary

machine-learning algorithms punctuating our twenty-first century hyper-globalized media landscape, the neoliberal product also re-formats and regenerates pre-existing objects to equip itself with the facets it previously lacked. It is productive to think of the new object as a self-reflexive weaponized



Figure 3. Yves Tumor for HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs F/W 22

defence mechanism devoted to preserving the ever-decaying body of late-stage capitalism. The conveyor belt of industrial capitalism detailed in Kracauer's treatise on the mass ornament has ostensibly secured itself to the neoliberal subject. Instead of "[running]' its secret course in public" (Kracauer 78), the inverse logic of neoliberal capitalism is that it openly accentuates its structures of subjugation to signal professional development; success is tied only to the outward celebration of capitalistic excess.

Anti-Aesthetic Imperialism: The Hyper-Commodification of Difference

Anti-aesthetic imperialism is the product of regression under neoliberal capitalism, the gauche act of repurposing, regenerating, and re-commodifying existing material; it is a form of deception. In disguise, the new product provides consumers with what they already have again and again. Anti-aesthetic imperialism occurs when neoliberalism subsumes the alternative, the expression of counter-hegemony, into the realm of production; it adopts the alternative to acknowledge capitalism's mutation of difference into a commodity itself. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, "adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power[;] The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression" (28). The prosumer's distraught adaptation to new trends suggests an era of

irresistible regression in our attempt to keep pace with the ever-changing demands of mass culture. We are witnessing an era of mass culture defined by hyper-accelerated consumerism; cultural trends exist now even more as apparitions, their duration cut short by the next short-form TikTok video or carousel Instagram post.

Deception occurs when the alternative object is held in tension with capital. Anti-aesthetic imperialism draws upon the legacies of postmodernism and the anti-aesthetic as a strategy to further exploit and expand the market, fetishizing difference as a prerequisite to consumer satisfaction. Previously saturated by so-called traditional forms of beauty, our current phase of mass consumerism has adopted the alternative. Self-reflexivity, appropriation, and parody define capitalism's narrow attempts towards dominating consumer interest(s). This phenomenon is not, however, limited to the digital or cinematic realms. Instead, there now exists a hyper-obsession in popular culture with high-fashion clothing brands and other luxury retailers adopting counter-aesthetic aesthetics as marketing technique(s). For example, this phenomenon culminates in areas of contemporary fashion such as Marc Jacobs' release of their Gen-Z targeted sub-brand, Heaven. Defined as "a gateway into the sprawling and enigmatic omniverse of Marc Jacobs subversion" ("HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs"), Heaven appropriates the postmodern aesthetics of parody and stylistic amalgamation, a trademark of cur-



Figure 4. Doja Cat for HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs F/W 22



Figure 5. Barragá S/S24

rent lesser-known designers, to corner the interests of the Gen-Z market. Blatantly, the brand positions itself at the "intersection between fashion, art, TV, and film" (Wenger), often collaborating with mainstream artists from all four cultural domains. In this sense, the brand positions itself as a synthesis of all of the various fac-

ets categorizing our culture industry. Heaven demonstrates how the apparatus of anti-aesthetic imperialism replicates 'difference' as an object of desire to dominate creative output and sway contemporary patterns of mass consumption. In this sense, anti-aesthetic imperialism can be considered neoliberalism's "instrument of power and self-mastery" (ibid), realizing the objectives of neoliberalism through an aesthetic curation of cultural products to control mass consumption. Above all else, anti-aesthetic imperialism celebrates its ability to accommodate the negative aspects of life under capitalism, reducing the total weight of capital to a mere aesthetic category; it teases the avant-garde with its own aesthetic expressions of dissonance and self-reflexivity. Anti-aesthetic imperialism is the parodic spectacle of cultural entropy: a weaponized superficiality acknowledging the oppressive nature of capital through the hyper-commodification of difference.

Anti-aesthetic imperialism, however, is not an end in itself. The hyper-commodification of difference, a strategy dominating film programs, the pages of periodicals, and music-streaming services, does not negate our interpretations of alternative cultural objects nor render their expressions meaningless. Adorno and Horkheimer note:

"The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form of blindness which supersedes that of vanquished myth. Through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity" (28-29)

This regression underscores the ideology operationalizing anti-aesthetic imperialism. It defines a process of commodification where products are merely amalgamations of abstraction; objects pieced together with the constituent parts of previous items. This, however, is not the problem I primarily concern myself with, nor do I agree that repurposing previously made objects is inherently fatalistic. This practice has defined and sustained the creative output of artists for decades. Instead, I use anti-aesthetic imperialism to describe the



Figure 6. *Playboy / Positions*, Shygirl (2023)

phenomenon of capital adopting abstraction, the parasitic piecing together of objects to exploit difference as a means of capital accumulation. Adorno and Horkheimer's definition of regression applies to anti-aesthetic imperialism as it remains outside of the cultural domains of artistic practice; art and commerce cannot knowingly coincide.

Instead, I assert alternative media objects under the regime of anti-aesthetic imperialism retain their meanings insofar as audiences engage with their inconspicuous superficial expressions. Kracauer's thesis is essential here. I posit that the surface-level expressions of contemporary mass culture, especially regarding the consumption and production of alternative objects, demarcate the beginning of an epoch similarly defined by a cult(ure) of abstraction operating under the auspices of apparition. I emphasize the importance of an analysis of the surface-level expressions of prosumers in the digital era as I believe it can "provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things" (Kracauer 75). Our current era of cultural production, specifically in terms of post-cinema, has reconfigured the mass in Kracauer's text. The "aerial photographs of landscapes and cities" (77) that delineated the movement and consumption behaviours of the masses have now been replaced by uniform photographs in fashion periodicals and on social media, replicating avant-garde counter-aesthetics to the point of exhaustion. This hyper-commodification of dissonant



Figure 7. Jenna Ortega for *THE FACE* Magazine, shot by Moni Haworth (2022)

aesthetics has engendered a form of mimesis distinct to our neoliberal capitalist epoch.

Cultural objects similarly preserve their affective qualities under anti-aesthetic imperialism; affect does not cease to exist under the structures of capital. Still, alternative objects still resist classification, commodification, and re-articulation by corporations and prosumers alike. The resistance and self-reflexivity of alternative media, the fetish object of anti-aesthetic imperialism, is irreplicable vis-à-vis its affective qualities regardless of its proximity to the re-produced object. Shygirl's music video *Playboy / Positions* (figure 6), the avant-garde runway pieces of designer Victor Barragán (figure 5), the photography of Moni Haworth (figure 7), and Ryan Trecartin's film *Center Jenny* (figures 1, 2, 8), exemplify the fact that alternative objects can resist domination despite mass culture's repackaging of their experimental, boundary-pushing, and ugly aesthetics; often to maintain cultural relevance and market shares.

Post-Cinema: Is this our way out?

In conclusion, I would like to re-pose the question I asked at the beginning: Is Post-Cinema a way out of aesthetic imperialism? What is different in our current phase of mass culture than from the epoch Kracauer, Adorno, and Horkheimer theorized is the decentralization of media consumption sites. Contemporary media spectatorship in the post-cinematic era designates the circulation of media outside traditional exhibition spaces. The same media object presented to

each of us online now exists in multiple formats on countless streaming platforms (Åkervall 38). Therefore, the consumption practices that define post-cinema have disrupted "the privileged spaces of reception for the moving image...from the cinema through the living room of domestic television" (ibid). This idea of cinema outside of fixed spaces problematizes the traditional notion of viewership or consumption as a communal experience. Instead, the contemporary viewing environment foregrounds a mode of consumption that is singular and mobile, often occurring across multiple screens (ibid). This decentralization of media consumption sites, therefore, obfuscates a Kracauerian understanding of contemporary mass culture as audiences have abandoned the behaviours previously used to trace mass consumption. The diffusion of media objects into the personal domain, hence, calls for a rethinking of alternative consumption under neoliberalism as an individual pursuit. Instead of masses "experiencing events together in public venues" (Averkall 36-37), the mobile phone or tablet screen demarcates a new hidden form of consumption implying a pervasive interconnected culture suffering from the unrelenting omnipresence of capitalism, alone.

Post-cinematic theory and aesthetics, ostensibly, address the problem of novel digital technologies, affixed to neoliberal economic relations, allowing our culture to manufacture and articulate lived experiences in radically new ways (Shaviro 2). These aesthetics, hence, operate in a digitally hybrid form by suturing



Figure 8. *Center Jenny*, Ryan Trecartin (2013)

contemporary media to transhistorical cultural behaviour. Post-cinematic film and videos, like Ryan Trecartin's *Centre Jenny* or Shygirl's *Playboy / Positions*, are thus concerned with engaging various media and popular culture references to critique our everyday usage of media, while at the same time decentering the individual, a strategy done so through what Lisa Åkervall terms the 'posthuman sensorium'. The posthuman sensorium considers the self in post-cinema as decentered and poly-perspectival, allowing affect to exist outside the singular subject (Åkervall 41). Films enacting the posthuman sensorium exist in multiplicities and cannot be "mastered by a subject or employed to consolidate the perspective of a humanist subject" (ibid). This idea similarly reflects Shane Denson's assertion of the post-cinematic as a media regime where "subjects and objects of perception are tragically transformed" (Denson 1).

In the regime of post-cinema, the borders of the human subject and media object are fluid, dissolving as new relations are forged through continuously advancing digital algorithms (ibid). It is this creation of a posthuman sensorium through digital manipulation which demarcates the post-cinematic aesthetic strategies of Trecartin's *Centre Jenny* and his strategic uses of the Jennies in the film. In this sense, the Jennies can be considered critically dissonant reiterations of one another, or rather individual imperial centres fetishizing the minutiae and aesthetics of contemporary pseudo-individuality. Trecartin's film, hence, applies a post-cinematic treatment to the experiences of the prosumer under neoliberal capitalism by visually illustrating the phenomenon of globalization "through a series of appendages, networks, and technologies" (Åkervall 41). Trecartin's use of sound-processing technologies digitally manipulates and exaggerates the high-pitched voices of his characters to depict a posthuman sensorium reconstructed by the engagement with new media technologies (ibid). Trecartin, therefore, formally suspends, and transcends the limits of, the human body to posture it towards our contemporary technological landscape. While, at the same time, abandoning the perceived formal norms ingrained by classical filmmaking to favour instead "editing styles and stories that exceed and overwhelm [audience's] perceptual and cognitive faculties" (41-42). *Centre Jenny* is itself a hybrid media object existing in the borderlands of anti-aesthetic imperialism as it repurposes digital and material media to critically (en)counter our relationship to

and use of entertainment. The post-cinematic is, thus, perhaps the closest mode of (non) cinema that calls on us to address our current neoliberal moment self-reflexively; examining our positions in the regime of neoliberal capitalism, and our relationships to prosumerism and anti-aesthetic imperialism. Hence, although I cannot yet answer the above question, our way out of, or at least against, anti-aesthetic imperialism cannot simply be through the re-articulation of abstraction; an aesthetic practice which seemingly characterizes post-cinema. Using ideology against itself, in this instance, would not be entirely productive; Adorno and Horkheimer would also undoubtedly agree.

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HAUNTOLOGICAL

FORM:



Where We Might Find the New

By Dr. James Sweeting

To answer the question “where might we find the new” this paper will provide insight into the circumstances that encapsulate contemporary videogames. Acknowledging that since the start of the new millennium the future has been increasingly difficult to locate, simultaneously, contemporary videogames have been preoccupied with looking towards the past for answers. Nostalgia has often been considered as a potential source for the state of reverie that the past provides, whether that be from history or media form. However, nostalgia is not the source of the increasing reliance on the past, rather it is the identifiable symptom of something else, that being hauntology.

Mark Fisher (2022b, p. 25) asks “is hauntology, as many critics have maintained, simply a name for nostalgia?” The short answer is no, as the two terms are not the same thing, although there is overlap between the two. I argue nostalgia to be the *visible* element of hauntological processes upon videogame form. But, if this is the visible element, then how can we explain its presence, such as instances where consumers of media speak of nostalgia for something

they have no memory of and/or exist outside of their own living memory?

If hauntology identifies that contemporary media is as reliant on the past as it is, what does this mean for the future? Is the *new* – and its presence in videogame form – at risk of disappearing, replaced by what might be initially identified as nostalgic longing. Fisher (2022b, p. 113) explains that “the kind of nostalgia that is so pervasive may be best characterised not as a longing for the past so much as an inability to make new memories”. This further supports the notion that the presence of what has previously been understood as nostalgia is not consumer-led, as might have been thought. Instead, this “inability to make new memories” is an inability for mediums to imagine not only a different present from what came before but also an inability to imagine a different future.

Expanding upon the work of Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher, and Simon Reynolds on hauntology, I have identified a specific form that emerges from the relationship between hauntology – which can include identifiable nostalgia – and the efforts to maintain momentum within contemporary videogame form, I have termed this Hauntological Form. How hauntology, as well as nostalgia, is understood can vary based on who is asked as well as how far back one looks for a definition. Fisher, Reynolds, and I go beyond Derrida’s (1994, p. 10) coining of the concept which identified communism’s ability to resurface despite its supposed demise (as argued by

Francis Fukuyama (1992)) and address the struggle of contemplating the future of media form. This paper will argue that hauntological form, despite initial appearances, provides a future for contemporary videogames (and by extension popular media) even if it is not as revolutionary as would have been expected by those previously imagining what the 21st century could bring.

Did Hauntology possess the new? Where did the future go?

Hauntology itself is not new but it is being used in a novel way. Jacques Derrida (1994, p. 10; Coverley, 2020, pp. 7–8) originally coined hauntology as a play on haunting and ontology (*l'hantologie*), outlining that elements of the past can return and continue to *haunt* the present. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida (1994) used hauntology to argue that communism had not disappeared with the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992) but was still a lingering presence. Hua Hsu (2018, para. 7) states that Fisher “borrow[s]” (or adopts) the term hauntology and uses it to “describe art that seems to yearn for a future that has never arrived”. Hsu’s statement is appropriate, as not only has Fisher made the term his own, but it also differs from Derrida who is stating that the future has still not been decided and that the past is influential in that process. Whereas Fisher applies hauntology to what can be considered an exhausted present. There is no steam left to power a new future. In practice, this suggests that Fisher’s use of hauntology is a criticism of creative media that seems to have given up on the future, and instead imitates the past, or more specifically, past media forms. Thus, the presence of hauntology treats the past as a repository for content.

Part of a wider trend that Fisher (2022b, p. 6) points out via Franco “Bifo” Berardi is “The slow cancellation of the future”. This trend is not a new phenomenon, as Fisher claims the process began between the 1970s and 1980s in wider culture, with those from earlier generations (pre-millennial) likely to be “startled by the sheer persistence of recognisable forms” which is particularly clear in popular music culture. Those growing up with popular music from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, previously could use music styles as a way “to measure the passage of cultural time” (Fisher, 2022b, p. 7). Yet Fisher notes that when considering 21st century music, the idea of “future shock” (Toffler, 2022) has disappeared because there is nothing *new* to generate such a response (Fisher, 2022b, pp. 7–8). Fisher (2022a, p. 7) also argued “that the failure of the future was constitutive of a postmodern culture scene

which, as [Fukuyama] correctly prophesied, would become dominated by pastiche and revivalism”. This brings about a question of whether the revivalism is a response to the “failure of the future” or a contributing factor of it. Or, that this is an inevitability, in which these two aspects grow in tandem.

When reviewing Fisher’s work, Tom Whyman (2019, para. 14) notes that politics and culture “seem stuck in the same loop” despite technologies such as mobile communication and the internet having – as argued by Fisher – “altered the texture of everyday experience beyond all recognition”. Yet conversely, Whyman argues that because of the rapid changes brought about by specific technological advances have enabled Fisher (2022b, p. 9) to state that “cultural time has folded back on itself”. Meaning that because of the accessibility that the internet and interconnected technology provides, not only has “the past lost its lostness...similarly the future (and futurism, futuristicness) no longer has the charge it once did” as affirmed by Reynolds (2012, p. 245).

Combining access to past media and an ability to recreate the form/style of the past is as Reynolds (2012, p. 247) remarks a “paradoxical combination of speed and standstill”. Supported by the observation that:

“In the analogue era, everyday life moved slowly...but the culture as a whole felt like it was surging forward. In the digital present, everyday life consists of hyper-acceleration and near-instantaneity...but on the macro-cultural level things feel static and stalled.” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 247).

Whilst the future has become difficult to pursue, the continued presence of the past is at odds with how we can understand nostalgia. Nostalgia can be thought of as a wistful longing for something that has past, which would indicate that it is no longer accessible, and it is the sense of loss that makes it powerful. However, it is via Dom Ford’s (2021) consideration of Fisher’s (and Reynolds’) work that helps to identify the problem with considering nostalgia in this way, given how *present* it is. Ford has also been influenced by Fisher’s consideration of “retro”, highlighting his reference to the time “lived through since the 1970s of ‘not giving up the ghost’”. Further explained by Fisher “as a failed mourning” (Fisher, 2022b, p. 22; Ford, 2021, para. 12) meaning that instead of moving on and “mourning” for the time that has past, popular culture (specifically media from the Global North) has failed to do so. Instead holding onto the time that past during the latter parts of the twentieth century, leading one to posit whether the past can be mourned

if it never *died*? However, there might be a fear or concern that the past could be lost, which is where other connections between hauntology and nostalgia can arise.

Ford (2021, para. 19) supports this, arguing that “the present is suffused with the presence of absence, the haunting of the past that is sometimes literal and crystallised, pointing to a broader spectrality”. Ford also mentions the irretrievability of the past, yet, in this instance that is not the issue. The past is all too accessible. I argue that it is because of this and a seeming desire to *attempt* to escape – or move on from – the past that has seen this haunting become more problematic. This has resulted in identifying an expansion upon Ford’s (2021, para. 12) distinction of “modern sense of nostalgia” which represents the loss of the past, whereas crucially “hauntology remarks upon the loss and absence of the past simultaneously with its presence in the present”.

This is apt when considering Svetlana Boym’s (2002, p. 8) exploration of nostalgia, notably her description of “[m]odern nostalgia...as a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return”. Nostalgia, unsurprisingly, is too focused on the sense of loss that can be attributed with the past, as opposed to identifying nostalgia in the present, which is not the same as hauntology. Nostalgia can represent a more intentional attempt of trying to reclaim the past and transport it to the present. Still, the result will be an anachronism, sticking out from the contemporary setting, appearing as a form where it is apparent that nostalgic elements have been brought to it. Hauntology though is different with the *intent* of its presence.

The continued presence of the past in its act of haunting the present does however, as suggested by Fisher (2022b, p. 22), give a “nostalgic quality to [the] haunting” despite this seeming contradictory to the point made previously. Yet, the reason why in practice it is not a contradiction is because by “not giving up the ghost” Fisher (2022b, p. 22) states that the result is “lost futures: looking to the past for a possible future, but a future that can no longer exist”. This is a key distinction. We have been fixated on looking at the past and its relationship with the present, meanwhile efforts for a future different (in trajectory) to our present is what is at risk of being lost. Whilst this can be evident across a spectrum of issues, it is no less true with videogame form.

Novelty is dead, but we can still have “new” things.

As stated at the beginning of this paper the question that is being addressed is “where we might find the new”. To do so though, it is crucial to distinguish what is actually being referred to when talking of *new*. My research into understanding what is happening to contemporary videogame form gained greater clarity after having deliberately separated how new is perceived as opposed to *novelty*. The two terms are often used synonymously, but, separating them enables us to identify what can be done with elements from the past and the impact these can have upon contemporary videogame form (as well as other media forms).

What this means is that mediums such as videogames can still claim to provide new pieces of media, but those media pieces lack the novelty (distinctiveness) that previously was more commonly found. Expanding on this, albeit reductively, *new* can be in the form of a product that has not existed in this exact form before and is available for consumption, a new *product*, whereas *novel* provides something inherently different and unique from what has come before. For example, a videogame such as *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) is a new IP (Intellectual Property) and offers unique gameplay as well as narrative elements for players. Contemporary videogames, therefore, can provide novelty, but the past two decades have seen it decline within mainstream output; hence contributing to why questions surrounding the locating of new exist.

Why, though is such a distinction needed? A shortage of innovation and revolutionary change (as opposed to more gradual evolutionary change) can be observed in the videogames medium and can be considered a response to players’ consumption habits. Derek Thompson (2018, p. 7) has argued that “[m]ost consumers are simultaneously *neophilic*, curious to discover new things, and deeply *neophobic*, afraid of anything that is too new”. This is reflected in the mainstream videogames released that continue to be commercially successful. Tease something different yet provide familiarity. This is where we can identify hauntological form, as to compensate, mediums are looking towards the past for inspiration as well as a source for alternative elements. These are to make up for the lack of revolutionary change but still enough to either provide evolutionary change (or the illusion of it) or mask the absence of meaningful change via something *different* to other contemporary releases.

There is also access to the wealth of past ideas and content which has been contributing to the facilitation

of late-stage capitalism. This is because the direction that cultural media such as videogames, film, and music are going in are engaging with a contradiction of their own mediums as well as that of capitalism; that being the continual production of new things to consume. It is also in line with what Fredric Jameson (1991, p. 20) has identified via what he called the “nostalgia mode”. Resulting in an anachronism that at first “are sufficiently ‘historical’-sounding” but there is also “something not quite right about them” (Fisher, 2022b, p. 11). Rather than providing consumers with “new” (or rather novel) products to consume, the past is being mined to *extract* the last penny (Newman, 2009, para. 5) to provide instead media products that appear new or different enough from what was previously available. Therefore, working to delay capitalism’s end by helping to sustain its existence with the illusion of “new” products to sell to and appease consumers. This highlights late-stage capitalism’s dependency on the past to maintain the façade of forward momentum and squeeze out profits from previous production.

Mainstream videogame franchises have been awash with this approach, with continued entries of long-running franchises (some annually). *Halo Infinite* (343 Industries, 2021) is one such example. The way the game was described during development and subsequently marketed was that this new entry was supposed to provide a new experience by providing players with an “open-world” to explore. Not only had this partly been done in a previous entry (*Halo 3: ODST* (Bungie, 2009)) but the final product was a conventional First-Person-Shooter (FPS) that included tropes that were present amongst other contemporary releases that had come before it.

Hauntological Form: A solution to maintaining momentum in contemporary media form.

H auntological form is a means of understanding when contemporary form is intrinsically haunted by the past. This *haunting* takes hold in different ways, whether that be from past media forms, historical/past events, or in-game (narrative) past events. Identifying hauntological form does not need to satisfy all these conditions and can be a variable combination. This also does not suggest that contemporary media forms are incapable of novelty or newness, but elements of past forms still linger, and it is this factor that changes how we can understand contemporary form and where changes can be identified.

This aligns with a quote identified by Reynolds (2012, p. 361) that “when the past sounds more like

However, hauntological form is not considered as a solely negative concept. Whilst it can be understood negatively in the sense that it highlights a lack of revolutionary change from the medium, it should also be viewed as a means for videogames to sustain some evolutionary change.

the future than the present does, revival becomes progressive”. As when the past becomes ubiquitous in contemporary form, it is irrelevant whether futuristic (or just forward-facing) media output is present as hauntological form can become the norm and the new variations or reworkings of past form are deemed as progressive instead.

What is being argued is that hauntological form is a fusion of Derrida’s and Fisher’s interpretations. Agreeing with Fisher that the future is difficult to find, especially when the past has become a core point of reference, but also acknowledge Derrida’s insights that the past can impact the present which in turn can alter the future. Hauntological form can be understood as when contemporary form is intrinsically haunted by the past. But also acts as a solution to the cultural malaise, that instead of wallowing in the lack of novelty, embraces the presence of the past to provide an opportunity for something different.

Aided by different methods of exploration it can be understood that hauntology provides an insight into how the past is increasingly acting upon the medium’s present. No longer remaining as the past, but instead actively *haunting* the present. However, hauntological form is not considered as a solely negative concept. Whilst it can be understood negatively in the sense that it highlights a lack of revolutionary change from the medium, it should also be viewed as a means for videogames to sustain some evolutionary change.

This is argued to be evident with the more recent mainline entries of *The Legend of Zelda* series, *Breath of the Wild* (BotW) (Nintendo EPD, 2017) and its direct sequel *Tears of the Kingdom* (TotK) (Nintendo EPD, 2023) – the latter further evident of hauntological form due to its significant, but meaningful, reuse of many elements from the previous entry. BotW successfully managed to break away from the structural conventions that had formed in previous 3D entries of the series, however, it also meaningfully benefited by

continuing to utilise elements from across the series as well as objectives and iconography. These elements from the past, rather than holding these new entries back by an adherence to the past, instead benefit from previous creative elements to facilitate novel ideas without having to invent something wholly original.

Recognising hauntology as a source for nostalgia still does not quite answer the problem considering the location of the new, which is where the term hauntological form provides the final piece needed to provide an answer – or at least a tool to help – to explain “where we might find the new”. Hauntological form provides a means of sustaining contemporary videogames amidst its inability to imagine a different future (as per Fisher’s concerns) and the inefficiencies it is dealing with, such as extended development times, which contribute to the medium’s reluctance to take risks. Therefore, videogames find safety and support from its past, using it as a resource to maintain relevance and provide the illusion of momentum.

The significance of the past and its reappearance in the present is not just about bringing media *products* back, as crucially in the case of hauntological form, it is also about incorporating elements of it into the present to do something *different*. This aligns with what Matt Colquhoun (2022, p. xiii) clarifies regarding a misconception about Fisher’s work: “it was not his position that nothing ever happens or ever changes [in culture]” but rather that during 2006 and 2014 (whilst Fisher was still alive) and from 2014 to 2022 (after Fisher’s death) “everything changed, and that’s why it is so weird that so much has stayed the same”.

Therefore, with hauntological form, I am providing a concept for contemporary videogames to efficiently utilise past form to sustain itself despite a lack (but not complete absence) of novelty yet still provide newness (in the form of new products), whether that be to a new audience or an existing one. Hauntological form acts as the evolution of Derrida’s and Fisher’s work, remixing together as something more optimistic than Fisher’s interpretation and more specific than Derrida’s application. Hauntological form does not exist without the previous work on hauntology and builds upon it as a response to the ongoing state of videogame form.

Conclusion

In the aim of determining where one “might find the new”, hauntological form provides the videogames medium with the means of offering an alternative perception of the past, positioning it instead as a means of ensuring that the medium has a

future. Hauntological form provides a more optimistic view than alluded to by Fisher’s and Reynolds’ initial application of hauntology upon media, primarily music in their case. Whilst contemporary videogames are indeed haunted by their past, this is not a weight holding it back. Rather, it is a means of familiarity to enable survival when momentum is more difficult to sustain. The past provides a wealth of resources that videogames (and other mediums) can utilise. Novel forms are the sacrifice of this as they are inherently compromised by this approach. However, hauntological form enables new variations (remediations) of past forms that can both appeal to those familiar with previous forms as well as entice new audiences; thus, giving them access to new products. The result is that the *new* is more familiar than had previously been anticipated for future forms, which helps provide an explanation as to why it has been harder to find. Previous expectations have been for continued novel experiences to be present in future videogame releases, resulting in bemusement due to its absence. Keeping in mind the initial intentions for hauntology from Derrida, the past can bring meaningful impact upon the present, especially in the face of an uncertain future.

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Mobilizing Anxieties of Ecological Scarcity in Larissa Sansour's *In Vitro*

by: Alice Reiter

Ecological imagery in Palestinian art and media has long been used for political means. In an extensive repository for such media, The Palestine Poster Project Archives, eco-imagery represents a large proportion of the iconography the archivists have documented (Liberation Graphics). Many of these posters are intended to galvanize the public towards supporting a political cause, and others stand as advertisements of Palestine's natural resource offerings; this tells us that plants and landscape are deeply held symbols of nation, resistance, belonging, and ownership. Moreover, the themes of scarcity and abundance in the natural environment are constantly at play in art and media, and in the larger political discussions that surround them. Some imagery within Palestinian visual art represents an ecological worldview; I observed a trend across the work of several Palestinian visual artists, with imagery reflecting ecological abundance of the past being usurped by occupying forces. Visual art by Sliman Mansour, Ismail Shammout, Malak Mattar, and others demonstrates the ways that they respond to loss of land and natural landscape following occupation. Building upon these themes, Palestinian filmmaker Larissa Sansour, in turn, uses the filmmaking process to imagine a "new," negotiating this dichotomy of scarcity and abundance. Film as a medium brings images into dialogue with the important practice of poetry in Palestinian culture; it is therefore worthwhile to examine how film form is

mobilized to explore these environmental issues.

To this end, I use an eco-critical framework to analyze Larissa Sansour's film *In Vitro* (2019), where these views of ecological scarcity are represented through the mise-en-scene of the characters' concrete subterranean village keeping them safe from the inhabitable air post-eco-apocalypse. Also reflected in the film (and additionally, Sansour's earlier film *Nation Estate* (2012)) are the ways that ecocide and occupation go hand in hand within a Palestinian artistic imaginary. This also means that caring for plants can correspond to anticolonial resistance: more elements of the mise-en-scene in Sansour's film reflect a Palestinian alternative environmentalism, a concept elaborated by scholar Ghada Sasa, which associates the natural environment with steadfastness and return.

Ecological Abundance in Palestinian Art

A worldview often expressed in Palestinian cultural output when it comes to pre-occupation ecology and environment is one of abundance, and this idyllic agrarian past is plentifully illustrated by Palestinian artists. The relationship between *fellahin* (farmers) and their land is depicted in many pastoral scenes in painting, and artists like Sliman Mansour have even integrated natural materials like straw, mud, and soil into their artistic practice (Ankori 80). Besides the manual bond with the earth illustrated in agrarian painting, the joy of being in nature is portrayed through the motif of women dancing in the outdoors among trees, which comes up in many paintings by Palestinian artists.¹ Many artists have painted the olive or orange harvest,

1. Ismail Shammout's *The Spring that Was* (1966); Tayseer Barakat's *Path of Love* (1989); Maher Naji's *Folk Dance and Dabka*; Malak Mattar's *The Olive Harvest* (2019) and *My Skin is Not a Sin* (2020).

as these pastoral activities are inextricably linked to Palestinian heritage.²

Beyond just painting, a discussion on Palestinian artistic practices must incorporate poetry. Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata emphasizes the importance of the spoken word: “today, still, it is the poet, not the ‘image-maker’ who has the singular power to move the national soul” (Boullata 80). Nonetheless, in his article “Facing the Forest,” Boullata covers important developments in Palestinian art by outlining a diversity of artists’ approaches to depicting landscape, and in keeping with his assertion, also demonstrates how these visual depictions are intimately related to the spoken and written word. Representation of landscape in the Palestinian painting tradition is relatively recent and corresponds to the integration of Western painting principles into artistic practice in the mid-20th century (Boullata 80-81). In this way, a consideration of the importance of language and the spoken word when encountering Palestinian visual art would steer analysis in a culturally specific direction. Boullata pays close attention to the titles of visual artist Walid Abu Shakra’s pastoral drawings, for instance, which illuminate the artist’s careful documentation of place names for each drawing produced. The significance of the work thus hinges on the written word and place-specificity as much as the visual element: only taken together are we able to read the significance. Keeping this in mind for film analysis, Boullata’s characterization certainly works well for reading film texts, being a medium that ties poetry and the spoken word with images.

A film text in which this can be observed is Larissa Sansour’s film *In Vitro* (2019). In this film, the characters live underground after an eco-apocalypse has rendered Bethlehem unliveable. The two characters have differing relationships to the outside world of before—the older character, Dunia (Hiam Abbass), has memories of her home, the landscape, her olive harvest, and her family. The younger character, Alia (Maisa Abd Elhadi), is in fact a clone of Dunia’s late daughter, with memories of the world planted in her mind, but no actual lived experiences of life on the outside. Essential to the post-apocalyptic world Sansour has created for this film are glimpses of a past before the ruination – images of a destroyed world are all the more meaningful when considered along with images of what once stood in the ruins’ place. Memories of abundance, when put together

with the present’s hollow void, make clear just how much was lost. In *In Vitro*, these memories of the world before come in the form of flashbacks that resemble the Palestinian olive harvest paintings discussed before, such as beautiful shots of the characters in their olive grove, market scenes full of an abundance of spices and bread, groups of nuns walking around happily. Foliage is abundant and rolling hills surround the characters’ home, but these images are all still behind a veil of monochrome, the true beauty of the flora’s colours inaccessible to us in the same way as for the protagonists. In addition to the desaturation, these similarities of the flashbacks to common motifs in Palestinian painting are also troubled by the characters’ words: Alia reveals that none of these memories are hers, but rather an amalgamation of memories that, as a clone, she has been designed to store for an indefinite future. Incredibly, she also houses sensory memories: she recounts, “I remember walking through the rain and feeling my shirt sticking to my skin. The flames of a bonfire heating my face.” Alia rejects the burden of these memories because she knows nothing else than her underground concrete home. In this way, Alia is a representation of an imagined future of scarcity, the personification of the inability to properly access a natural environment and the anxieties that this produces.

Her character’s story, told through her own words, can be seen as a metaphor for diasporic Palestinians’ relationship to Palestine through inherited memories in the absence of physical presence on the land. Social anthropologist Nayrouz Abu Hatoum writes on the temporal fragmentation that the occupation creates for Palestinians and the affective experience of this; violence ruptures time, making the future difficult to conceptualize. This suspended future creates a period of waiting for diasporic Palestinians – waiting for return, for the end of the Israeli occupation – that is characterized by uncertainty (Abu Hatoum). As she puts it, “the future for Palestinians becomes an imaginative space where suspicion and hope coalesce” (Abu Hatoum 398), and we can see this coalescence materialized in the underground world of *In Vitro*. The characters make it clear through their dialogue that they are waiting to return overground, but the architectural permanence of their concrete home suggests an uncertainty that this future of return will come to pass. Alia, as a clone of a deceased person and a store for memories of other deceased people, is a repository of the past in service of an uncertain future. Alia’s story can therefore also be read as a personification of the mourning for lost futures in the wake of environmental destruction. Her existence

2. Sliman Mansour’s *Yaffa* (1979) and *Orange Picking* (1980s); Maher Naji’s *Jaffa Oranges* and *Olive Season*; Najat El-Taji El-Khairy’s *Salam* series (2004-22), to name just a few.

is for the purpose of storing a collective longing for the past, in response to the suddenly lost future that her community has experienced. As they reside underground indefinitely, Alia is a collection of ghosts waiting for a future that may never happen. Dunia emphasizes how Palestine, as a holy site, is particularly haunted by the past: “Bethlehem was always a ghost town. The present upstaged by the past.” Now that it has been destroyed by an eco-disaster, Bethlehem is doubly a ghost town, frozen in time by Biblical history and environmental destruction. Alia, then, is a representation of Palestinian lost futures.

Imagined futures of scarcity

In Vitro sees the world going underground, the streets uninhabitable because of a thick, black liquid coursing through them. In flashback, Dunia and her family run away from a burning Bethlehem, their houses abandoned. To expand on the aforementioned trend in Palestinian visual art of anxieties about environmental scarcity, including in *In Vitro*, it is useful to look at the current environmental realities in the West Bank, where Bethlehem is located. Reports from various human rights organizations such as Al-Haq and the UNRWA have found that people in the West Bank disproportionately suffer the consequences of environmental crimes, which come as a result of Israeli policies, industry, and infrastructure. Authors of the 2015 Al-Haq report documented a long list of environmental crimes in the West Bank and Gaza, including industrial pollution of residential areas (Pontin et al. 25), drinking water contamination by waste dumping (26-7), and landscape deprivation, which covers its spiritual significance as well as issues of mobility within these landscapes (30). They detail how these practices violate the Oslo Accords (47) and international laws regarding the responsibilities of an occupying power toward civilians under belligerent occupation (37). On the issue of water access, the UN’s Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People highlights Israel’s disproportionate water provision to its own citizens (and settlers within the Occupied Territories) compared to Palestinians (Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People). Hydrologist Clemens Messerschmid substantiates this in his 2007 talk on the subject of Zionist intervention and water scarcity (Messerschmid). Finally, the UNRWA’s Barrier Monitoring Unit found that Israel’s Separation Barrier limits Palestinians’ water source access and full use of agricultural lands divided by the barrier; the barrier and its construction also

drastically affects ecosystems, agriculture, and soil erosion (Barrier Monitoring Unit (BMU) and Applied Research Institute Jerusalem (ARIJ)).

Given the persistence of these man-made environmental issues, it makes sense that many Palestinian artists use ecological imagery in ways that emphasize these realities on the ground, as well as a possible future bereft of natural environment. Returning to painting, Sliman Mansour’s painting *From the River to the Sea* (2021) is of a woman holding onto an intertwined orange and olive tree, with holes dug all around the otherwise-empty landscape, suggesting that this is the last tree left. The title paired with the imagery connects Palestinian resistance with protection of the environment against colonial forces. Similarly, Ismail Shammout’s painting entitled *Where to..?* (1953) depicts a refugee family against the backdrop of a barren landscape after the Nakba, with a bare tree behind them. Here, the occupation is directly connected with environmental scarcity, and the title suggests an uncertain future; the date of this painting demonstrates anxieties of environmental destruction already present in the period immediately after the Nakba.

Sansour’s films continue this line of questioning about the future of the Palestinian people and the environmental scarcity that accompanies the

Palestinian artists use ecological imagery in ways that emphasize these realities on the ground, as well as a possible future bereft of natural environment.

occupation. Sansour’s imagining of a black liquid flowing through the streets of Bethlehem is not that much of a mental leap from the realities of industrial pollution on Palestinian towns in the West Bank, for instance. In her films, through the mise-en-scene, she imagines a possible future in which ecological scarcity has reached a critical point, and Palestinians have had to conserve nature in contrived ways. In *Nation Estate* (2012), Sansour conceives Palestine as being transposed into a high-rise building, with the natural environment being confined to indoor spaces: the Mediterranean Sea occupies one floor, and an olive grove another. Like in *Nation Estate*, *In Vitro*’s characters are in a state of major landscape deprivation – one of the environmental issues outlined in the Al-

Haq report – and the constructed world in the film shows how their Palestinian society has adapted to this landscape deprivation. In the film, the world has moved underground post-eco-disaster into a Brutalist world of concrete. What seems like natural light from overhead shafts is the main source of illumination, making for a mostly shadowy ambiance. However, when the younger character looks out one of these windows, she looks not at the outside world but at an indoor atrium, making us wonder whether any of this light is natural at all. The barren surroundings give the characters’ home a clinical coldness and the vast, dark hallways suggest a scale that does not seem matched to the number of people we see— this environment is not full of life, in the literal sense. From what we see of their world, though, the two characters have access to medical care—the older character Dunia is on a hospital bed with an IV and a heart monitor—and both wear well-kept clothing and seem settled in this underground environment. The younger character, Alia, has grown up in this world, so has evidently had access to everything required to survive relatively comfortably. The main thing missing from both their lives, then, is access to the natural environment. This has been made impossible by whatever forces caused the eco-disaster to happen.

As in *Nation Estate*, natural resources have had to be relocated to locations where their survival would otherwise be futile. Without the sunlight needed to grow agriculture, *In Vitro*’s underground society has configured an orchard with available resources. Mediterranean cypress and other native tree species grow on the ground along with saplings, divided in sections. Smaller platforms mount the walls of the large atrium like opera boxes. Olive trees grow out of a box in the foreground, and next to it are closed glass cases of seedlings in jars.³ Pollination is possible through the bees salvaged from the world above, and lamps work to photosynthesize. There is vegetation coming from every angle of the atrium, and the cold, concrete architecture suddenly seems a lot more humid and inviting. The orchard brings comfort to Dunia: she is able to escape her “entombment,” as she calls it, when the orchard lights are on, and she can hear the ecosystem come alive.

A Palestinian alternative environmentalism

Despite the characters’ yearning for the outside world, Sansour’s imagined future of ecological conservation is successful;

3. This brings to mind artist Jumana Manna’s exploration of the life of a seed from the Global Seed Vault in *Wild Relatives* (2018).

an orchard is able to grow underground and the Mediterranean Sea is able to survive on the 28th floor of a skyscraper. Through eco-apocalypse and total spatial reconfiguration, nature is able to live on in impossible circumstances. These imaginings of decolonial environmental persistence also bring to mind Ghada Sasa’s conception of a Palestinian alternative environmentalism, under which she brings together the concepts of *a’wna* (collaboration), *sumud* (steadfastness), and *a’wda* (return) (Sasa). *A’wna* or collaboration is about all human and non-human entities living in harmony, stressing that harming one will harm all (Sasa 11). In this way, with *a’wna* the “human-nature binary... severely erodes,” making all species more interconnected (Sasa 12). The rupturing of this division between humans and non-humans also challenges the status-quo of the anthropocentric logic that fueled climate change. *A’wna* therefore allows us to conceptualize a future radically different than the current reality, and how caring for plants is also a means of countering Israeli environmental crimes. The underground orchard in *In Vitro* is a fitting example: with the underground society’s agricultural ingenuity, trees are able to grow and produce fruit without seeing the sun. The humans provide the means of survival for these trees outside of regular processes of photosynthesis, while the trees provide sustenance: *a’wna*. Although fictional scenarios, Sansour’s imaginings of flora and agriculture persisting in impossible conditions reflect the hopeful outlook of a Palestinian alternative environmentalism, even despite the Israeli occupation’s control of the environment.

Conclusion

Looking at the work of prominent Palestinian visual artists like Sansour, Mansour, Shammout, and others tells us how this resistance to the occupation plays out in visual terms. Narratives of ecological scarcity and abundance play an important role in how people think about the occupation of Palestine, and reflect the realities on the ground. An idyllic agrarian past is a common motif in the Palestinian painting I examined, with ecological abundance characterizing the time before occupation. Additionally, through Larissa Sansour’s mise-en-scène and use of ecological imagery in dialogue, her film *In Vitro* depicts Palestinians living in environmental scarcity, and its resulting mental toll. The world that Sansour has conceived of here fits the pattern of imagined futures of ecological scarcity that comes up in other Palestinian visual artists’ work

since 1948. A study of reports detailing environmental issues caused by Israeli occupation in the West Bank suggests that these anxieties of environmental failure are prompted by realities on the ground. However, Sansour's characters have managed to conserve their natural environment and agricultural practices even in the most inhospitable of landscapes, which echoes Ghada Sasa's notion of a Palestinian alternative environmentalism that centres collaboration and steadfastness through the violence of occupation. The connection and care for the environment that the selected visual artists depict in their work demonstrates this resistance to colonial occupation.

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Yani Kong: Special Article

Losing My Human Scale: Tiny Movies at the End of the World

The 1977 film *Powers of Ten* by Charles and Ray Eames begins on the Chicago lakeshore: a young couple prepares a picnic while they share a relaxing afternoon. As they settle in to rest on their blanket, an aerial shot pulls out to reveal the dozy pair from a meter above. The physicist Philip Morrison narrates a scientific demonstration that visualizes the relative size of things. The film begins with the napping man's hand at the centre of the frame, a vanishing point that remains throughout the film as the zoom lens reduces the human figures while continuously drawing upwards and outwards, eventually arriving at the expanse of outer space with its many stars and galaxies.

The two humans are framed inside a square of black screen with a unit of measurement on each side of it. On the left, the growing distance from the man's hand is measured in metres, and on the right, the number 10^x increases as the scale of the zoom escalates. *Powers of Ten* is an odyssey of measurement: "a film dealing with the relative size of the things in the universe."¹ It is a rapidly elevating technological journey that explores scale by way of a growing field of view: First the lake vanishes, then Chicago, then "the whole Earth," we see the solar system as it recedes into nothing, the Milky Way, the Virgo cluster. Finally, at 10^{24} power, the screen fades to intense blackness, hardly the limit of the vastness of outer space, but the bounds of our knowledge of it. From here, the zoom swiftly travels us back towards Earth to land on the same man's hand and it continues, passing through his skin's cellular membranes towards carbon atoms and molecules of DNA, what the film calls "the vast inner space."

When I screened this film with students, they reflected on it as an experience of being engulfed by the universe, where humans, or at least the students' human experience, were described as small in comparison to the immensity of the cosmos. In journals, some of them described a feeling of being dwarfed or lost in the expansiveness of what exists – sensations that suggest that the scale of the universe, 10^{24} power of human size, could really swallow us up like an atom, just as Blaise Pascal wrote in the seventeenth century.² Yet, the cosmic zoom of the film, even as it demonstrates all that the plentiful cosmos contains (and the abundant nothingness it seems to hold), nestles the picnickers at the centre of it all.³ Their peacefully napping bodies are the scale by which the universe is measured and comprehended (a nod again to Pascal) and they appear to rest easy, oblivious to the mighty forces of physics.

Powers of Ten, celebrated for its achievement in delivering the image of an infinite yet intelligible cosmos, also demonstrates what is central to the disenchantment of the world: humans, who "master all things through calculation," so goes Max Weber's definition, lie at the centre of the universe, their scale provides a comparative measurement for the things within it by way of their relative difference. Now we

1. Charles and Ray Eames, *Powers of Ten*, Pyramid Media: 1968. Film. This film is easily accessed online. For reference please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofKBhvDjuyo> (accessed February 19, 2024).

2. "Through space the universe encompasses and swallows me like an atom; through thought I comprehend the world." Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: P.F. Collier, 1910).

3. Cosmic view is a term Zachary Horton employs to discuss the depiction of scalar difference in a range of media of which *Powers of Ten* is the most well-known. He clarifies the term: "a self-consciously medial project that attempts to characterize the scalar articulations of the cosmos by visualizing, from a single perspective, a spectrum of scales from the largest to the smallest known. The cosmic zoom has taken textual, imagistic, motion picture, and new media forms. The most famous instantiation is *Powers of Ten*, a 1977 film by designers Ray and Charles Eames that begins with two picnickers in a field, zooms out to encompass the entire universe, then zooms in again until the nucleus of a single carbon atom fills the frame." Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge and Mediation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 4.



Yani Kong Presenting at the first annual UBC Undergraduate Film Conference. Photos by Jonathan Liu

have the term Anthropocene to name the current period of permanent geological change to the planet caused by human intervention. When geologists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer coined the term in 2000, they argued that our history of technological development and extractive practices had irreversibly transformed the Earth.⁴ The Anthropocene points to the long-term effects of human activity and our primary contemporary crisis, namely climate change, driven by a “universal perspective [that] stands at the zenith of human achievement in the realms of knowledge, ethics, and milieu-building technique.”⁵

Zachary Horton identifies the Anthropocene as a “crisis of scale” where the state of the environment calls for humans to confront themselves vis-à-vis the scale of permanent change caused by their practices.⁶ As a result of the advantages humans believe they have gained through industrialization, as well as their efforts to continually expand their dominance and maintain it, humans have adopted a perspective that ignores their own scale, meaning “entities of enormous or diminutive proportion seem to humans to possess scalar attributes, while we, the perceivers of those objects, seem to occupy a scale-free perspective.”⁷In *Powers of Ten*, as the master scale, “the default scale

may be the human picnic, but the picnic’s default perspective is universal.”⁸ As a practice of “scopic mastery,” to use Horton’s term, the zoom function in the film is effective, rendering a totalizing view by way of the human scale of the picnickers whose comparative measure makes the conceptual scale of the entire universe legible.⁹ It is possible to view the Eames’ film as positioning the picnickers as just one small piece of a larger cosmos, an experience of scale that my students communicated, but by centering humans as both the vanishing point and the unit of comparative measurement, the film reinforces what Horton calls “the scale of the rational,” a mono-scalar pattern of thinking that emphasizes the discourse of human autonomy, which stems from, at least, Enlightenment traditions of thinking.¹⁰ The film’s zoom function propels outwards from its human centre and extends them and its audience into the Milky Way and beyond. In watching *Powers of Ten*, what we consider our world has grown to include the scaler reach of the cosmos.¹¹

Any challenge to the crippling environmental effects of the Anthropocene begins by confronting the cause of the effects themselves, so pushing against the human centred focus that defines this

4. See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” in *The Future of Nature*, eds. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

5. Zachary Horton, “Composing a Cosmic View: Three Alternatives for Thinking Scale on the Anthropocene,” in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, eds. Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan and Springer Nature, 2017), 40. Horton, like other scholars in the Humanities such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, is critical of human centred perspectives. The Anthropocene imposes a human-centred universalizing overview, and the methods for intervening in the Anthropocentric damage of global warming remains based on humanity’s mastering vision.

6. *Ibid.*, 35.

7. *Ibid.*, 36.

8. Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom*, 70.

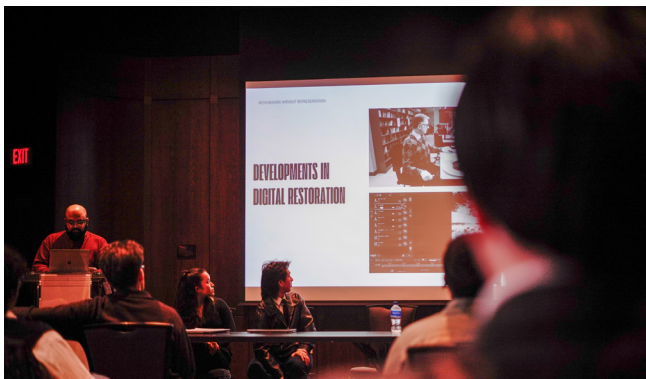
9. *Ibid.*

10. Horton, “Composing a Cosmic View,” 35-36.

11. Derek Woods, “Epistemic Things in Charles and Ray Eames’ *Powers of Ten*,” in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, eds. Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan and Springer Nature, 2017), 77. Woods describes *Powers of Ten* as an effort to educate its audience on their place within the universe, in doing so, the film privileges the ontological scale of the human by projecting the master scale outside of and beyond itself.

geological epoch.¹² To relinquish one’s human scale, or at least to decentre it, is difficult to put into practice, since the body remains the site of experience and a primary source of knowledge. Yet, we may approach this as an exercise in shifting perspectives – one that begins with the body and the scale of the self, but allows for the body’s primacy to slip away, becoming something of a site of inscription – or host– for the play of relations within and among the things in the

12. My argument follows Donna Haraway, whose critique of the contemporary terminology associated with the Anthropocene involves adopting terminology that more accurately embraces the multispecies field of relations, troubled and otherwise, that take place on Earth (the concepts of which I work through in a later section in this chapter). Haraway proposes an expanded perspective that is inclusive of multispecies combinations and collaborations between humans, animals, and other things, among other acts of combination as a method to erode the master scale. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).



Pictures from the first annual UBC Undergraduate Film Confernece

universe, a place of mixing and combination between the self and other selves, the self and other things. My current research on small-file media – moving image media that streams with low to no carbon footprint – involves practicing an embodied method of reception (or viewing). Through distortion, dispersal, and scale reorientation, small-file film aesthetics can help audiences practice flexibility in scale and perspective because these techniques generate affective attachment between the moving image and the viewer, such that one’s perspective can address not simply the film itself, nor their individual experience of watching it, but can align with the conditions of the world we live in.¹³

Small-file media is a creative practice developed by Laura U. Marks, to respond to the carbon footprint of the information and communication technologies (ICT) that encompass the internet: in particular, streaming media. Driven by the electrical intensity of data servers, networks, and consumer devices, ICT produces at least 4% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions — the same as the airline industry — and these numbers are projected to rise to 7% in 2030 and 15% in 2040.¹⁴ While Artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency, and the internet of things (e.g., self-driving vehicles, “smart home” products, etc.) are themselves increasing ICT’s carbon footprint, streaming media contributes more than any other ICT sector to this increase – this is when “Netflix and chill” requires burning fuels for leisure.

Small-file cinema intervenes in the rising carbon footprint of streaming media through the creation of low bandwidth films that stream at no more than 1.44 megabytes per minute – a miniscule fraction of the bitrate of high-definition videos which stream at an average of 4,000 Kilobites per second.¹⁵ Small file movies don’t share in the luxuries of their large-file, bandwidth- and energy-hungry counterparts that are meant to be streamed in 4K HD. Those are shows with smooth visuals that focus on narrative and obscure the materiality of the streaming medium. Small-file media provides an outlet for artists, filmmakers, and

13. See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachment, Ethics, Crossings*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Laura U. Marks *The Fold: From Your Body to the Cosmos*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

14. See F. Bordage, “The environmental footprint of the digital world.” (2019) Report for GreenIT.fr; Laura U. Marks and Steven Makonin, “Tackling the Carbon Footprint of Streaming Media,” Knowledge Synthesis Report. Social Science Humanities Research Council, 2021. White Paper; and Lotfi Belkhir and Ahmed Elmeigli, “Assessing ICT global emissions footprint: Trends to 2040 & recommendations.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 177 (2018):448-463.

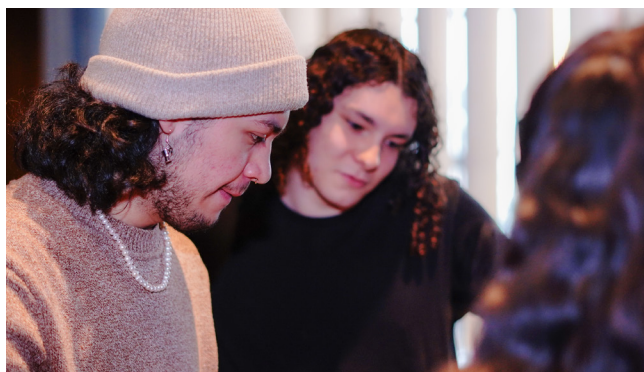
15. Film programs from the annual Small File Media Festival are archived and available for viewing at www.smallfile.ca along with instructional tutorials for artists interested in making small-file films.

environmental activists to explore the constraint in size through experiments with composition, camerawork, compression, glitch aesthetics, audio, and duration to speculate opportunities for energy efficiencies that do not compromise cinematic aesthetics.

Glints 3, A Ravine (2021), the third installment of the four-part small file film by Somayeh Khakshoor, opens to the filmmaker's whisper: "You can't look into my eyes/Look at the water and upturn." Water then begins to swirl in slow motion. At least it seems like water, but as it moves, it blends with itself without ever truly mixing, like oil and ink. If it was not for the sound of the rushing water and the hint of Khakshoor's title, one may never know what they are looking at because what can be seen is indecipherable as water. Still, she says, "May my faces rain on you." *They did.* I feel it. Watching from home, at her suggestion I move my head towards the sound of the ravine – ever closer to my laptop – ready to receive it.

Feel, we must, because small-file cinema does not trade in the economy of representation. To save in bitrate, the films are often short in length. Compressed for size, they can be blurry and hard to see. Some small-file movies contain dialogue (to save in file size), so sometimes, they are hard to follow. These are some of the traits of the movies' smallness, where compression, experimental and out-of-place audio, and duration become processes that erode the clichés of narrative cinema. To decrease their carbon footprints, the tiny movies are pared down so that what is left is entirely aesthetic. In the absence of representation, they become sensation.

In *A Ravine*, Khakshoor trains our gaze on movement and flow. The time of the film has been slowed, yet even this effect isn't readily apparent. Instead, the film feels intentionally thick: the fluid that consumes the screen seeps with a luxurious, even lazy quality in a basin of great depth. The audio is the hollowed-out sound of the lapping of this liquid; it the kind of sound that can only be heard when one's head is completely submerged. As I watch, my eyes follow the movement of the stream. My vision is dispersed to follow squirming streaks as they form along the surface, swishing and churning, drawing attention upwards and beyond the screen. This lasts less than a minute, then, time speeds up with a suddenness. For four seconds, it sounds like fluids rushing, rain driving. The fatty potion bubbles and floods with speed. At first, the film cultivates a sense of non-attention, scattering the gaze across the placid, trippy goo. Like a lava lamp or a vintage screen saver, the waves induce both an over-focus and a kind of



Pictures from the first annual UBC Undergraduate Film Confernece

non-focus where there is so much to observe about nothing in particular. Just as quickly, speed kicks in and we snap back to our familiar observational view. There was no event, yet the film delivers an experience of time, of being spellbound and then not.

Small-file cinema constitutes an aesthetic practice born of environmental necessity and formal experimentation. Artists can begin by filming with lower resolution. Paying attention to shape, color, and movement rather than content ensures a visually satisfying image. Recording sound in mono saves a lot of file space. Decreasing camera movement and movement in the frame, as well as using a shallow focal length, ensures that images can emerge from compression looking fairly crisp. And then compression, for small-file artists, is not a tiresome

necessity but becomes a creative medium of its own. Experimenting with the parameters of common compression platforms, such as Handbrake and Any Video Converter, artists can choose either to maximize fidelity or to exploit compression's formal potentials. For example, decreasing the frame rate saves a lot of file space and is initially barely detectible, but yields dreamlike saccadic motion at around 12 frames per minute. Depending on the parameters you select, figures can develop dramatic outlines or blur together in abstract patterns.

As if to revel in the limitations of its size, a small-file movie leans into all the things it can never be. To stream with a small footprint means the movie never can never be big: it has to be small, it has to be intensive rather than extensive which can involve experimental aesthetics that resist narrative identification in favour of abstraction. Some small-file movies do remain crisp and accessible, in part by calling on viewers' associations with form, movement, and sound. Across a selection of small-file movies, there is often the initial sensation of not knowing what we are watching, and this lack of figuration wears away at the codes of traditional viewership, in which colours, shapes, movement, sound and even story line get to play through without expectation. In a good small-file movie, every formal element matters and invites the spectator to admire how skillfully it serves the movie as a whole.

Small-file artists have described their efforts to apply a minimalist approach to a media form that typically embraces a maximalist ideology. While it can be common practice for makers to begin with a large format film, which is to say a film of conventional size and resolution, and then use compression software to scale the size of the file to fit the size limitation, many of the artists we spoke to worked to incorporate a 'small first' perspective into their process. (Slide – Show portion of Guo's film, Yan from 0:27) New York filmmaker, Vesper Guo, described relinquishing the size of the screen, making video art designed to be played on a laptop or mobile device. Beginning smaller for Guo means working within the constraints of individual device resolution. Guo's practice was nicely echoed by Tadeo Rios-Davila, who, drawing from the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, discussed his philosophical intention towards the small – exploring what it means to start small as a principle. The Little Prince begins by describing the nature of grownups and their inability to perceive "important things" conceivably because their growing up, that is, their "bigness," produces

a disinterest for the small in favour of "matters of consequence," where things need to be framed by order, empirical facts, categories, costs, and status in order to be paid attention to. It is a world where the big picture overshadows the small picture. If high-resolution cinema is a cinema of passive immersion, then small-file cinema is more demanding of the audiences' embodied capacity to embrace ambiguity and their willingness to search for what is there, even when it is hard to see.

To study the small-file film requires paying close attention to the rise and fall of affects that result from the viewing experience. Small-file films activate their audience as they work a little harder to grasp what is being watched. To stream with a small footprint resists the capitalist urge for increasingly higher definition. Enhanced abstraction disturbs the identification that conventionally occurs in the viewing experience. Complexity is revealed at the level of the pixel, in the proliferation of minutiae onscreen. As audience members our perspective moves outwards, from the molecular towards the molar, towards an understanding of the world in its completeness. As the novelist Nicole Krause writes, "To paint a leaf, you have to sacrifice the whole landscape. It might seem like you're limiting yourself at first, but after a while you realize that having a quarter-of-an-inch of something you have a better chance of holding on to a certain feeling of the universe than if you pretended to be doing the whole sky."¹⁶

Krystle Silverfox's landscape series, *Lost Connections*, uses small-file photographic practices to reference resource extraction and explore Indigenous land rights in the Yukon Territory. In a series of four still images of Yukon landscapes, Silverfox connects the aggressive history of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop in Canada with experiments in data moshing. The artist shrinks the file size of their photos by copying the originals and reopening them in the TextEdit program. They begin by deleting portions of the code which cause the images to glitch, change colour, pixelate, and distort, resulting in highly abstracted mountain ranges, treelines, lake views, and snowscapes. The data extraction involved in making *Lost Connections* offers a commentary on the technological landscape in the Yukon Territory, where rural and Indigenous areas experience limited access to highspeed bandwidth and intermittent electricity that reminds us that the internet and digital devices are not democratic tools, and that

16. In Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*, (New York: W.H. Norton and Company, 2005).

leveled-up devices are not frequently supported in lower infrastructure areas. By invoking extraction in their creation, Silverfox makes apparent the effects of a culture scrambled by colonization and refuses a certain legibility of the land; at the same time, they've created a small-file image that travels more lightly in a reduced digital structure.

As Donna Haraway has cautioned, the story told when we invoke the Anthropocene is one with a bad ending, because it links the continuity of the planet with the sustainability of human life.¹⁷ It is a rigid terminology that links geology with the impact of human scale, which, although accurate in its assessment of human caused geological change, does not sufficiently embrace other forms of continuous life that persist outside human systems, nor the partnerships that naturally occur. ICT and streaming media are technological processes that are themselves intensely reliant on modes of interconnection to produce communication between servers, crossing lands to bridge networks, and requiring sacred waters to cool data centres. I advocate cultivating our worldviews away from human-centred scales towards nonhuman and hybrid perspectives that embrace interconnections, to this end, seeking collaborations with technology through materially conscious use.¹⁸

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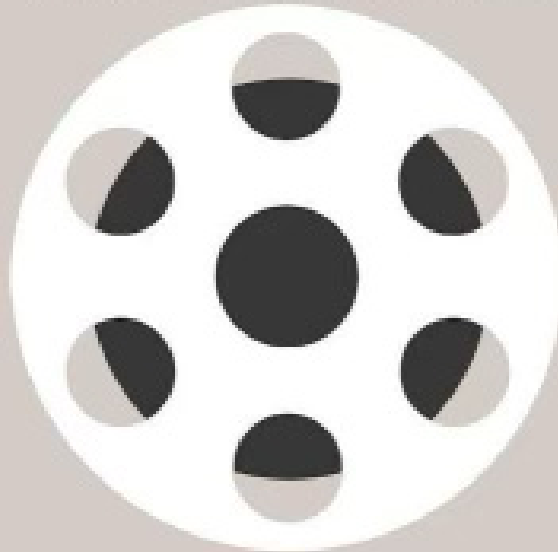
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17. See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.



18. See Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).



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VIFF

Vancouver International Film Festival

dir. Bas Devos

Here (2023)

Here (2023) opens with the glass-free window frames of construction sites. This immediately recalls *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), where characters stand in an unfinished, empty building overlooking the city, likening its window to a coloured, big-screen television. With the city in motion and the spectators stilled, *Here* eloquently captures the immigrant's hesitation to move.

The film exists in a timeless realm, set entirely during the holiday time before Stefan (Stefan Gota), a Romanian construction worker, departs Brussels to return home. This period of unsettling purposelessness signifies the perpetual transitional period for an immigrant, a constant, soliloquising “nowness”. Narrative functionalities are replaced by cross-sectional slices of plants and life. We see Stefan “here and there” in the largely unpopulated city, handing out soup to friends as goodbye gifts.

Here also explores a space beyond the physical, where the city acts as a vacuum punctuated by serendipitous exits: the gate to a city garden, the tunnel leading to nocturnal wanderings, or the heavy rain that brings Stefan and Shuxiu (Gong Liyou), a doctoral student studying mosses, together. Through these exits, Bas Devos reveals a fluid narrow rupture where the fabric of modern city life dissolves into sensory experiences and the dichotomy of work and life fades away. From such, *Here* proposes a form of poetic agency that stands apart from the neoliberal paradigm.

In *Here*, conversations unfold but seldom reach completion. People talk to themselves, issuing compliments, forgetting the names of things, and drifting off to dream of gatherings or the luxuriant greenery. *Here*, in the enclaves of the European city, mosses quietly breathe, a romance grows and melts into a smile.

Review by: Chuiwen Kong

Ryusuke Hamaguchi's return of *Evil Does Not Exist* (2023) takes a while to digest. At the heart of the narrative is a fear and rejection of capitalist contamination as it intrudes into and offsets the balance of a quaint countryside town. Obfuscated by the snowy landscape and a sleepy slow pace, the film deals with a deeply troubling moral dilemma which only fully reveals itself in the end. And by playing with dichotomies of man versus nature and city versus countryside, the act of violence becomes increasingly confused. Is the economic gentrification of a peaceful ecosystem an act of violence? Is it the same violence as a predator killing its prey? Can either be justified? Can either be evil? Neither human or animal-like, the sentiment and style of the film hints at something more ambiguous, interpolating human into animal and animal into human through love and bloodshed alike. Though not Hamaguchi's most ambitious projects, particularly following the success of *Drive My Car* (2021), it is certainly one of the hardest to grasp, a genius which takes a day or two to materialize fully. Perhaps it is because what is evil precedes our anthropocentric understanding, and to truly comprehend it requires its destruction to open gateways of a porous being, transcending ontology and morality all together.

Review by: Jasmine Sanau



Evil Does Not Exist (2023)

dir. Ryusuke Hamaguchi

2024 Reviews

dir. Alice Rohrwacher

La Chimera (2023)



The Boy and the Heron (2023)

dir. Hayao Miyazaki

In one scene, Italia and Arthur take Flora to the abandoned train station because she wants to see it again. It's overgrown and empty. She tells them she encouraged her daughters to travel. Beniamina especially, perpetually curious, jumped on any train. Italia asks who the building belongs to now, and Flora says no one, then everyone. It's a public building. "Does it belong to everyone or no one?" Italia asks. This is what *La Chimera* asks of the past and of the Etruscan artefacts buried in the Italian earth and dug up by Arthur (Josh O'Connor) and his gang of tombaroli to be sold first to a fence named Spartaco, then museums. Do the artefacts belong to everyone, to whoever finds and digs them up? Do they belong to the dead, as Italia (Carol Duarte) maintains? Is the past material or spiritual, means or ends? Is it meant for human eyes? O'Connor plays Arthur with his head in the earth, wandering and looking for his love, Beniamina, who is dead. He's a man who can find anything, even Beniamina, Flora (Isabella Rossellini), believes. In the middle of the film, the group leaves a party and walks to the beach by the power plant and discovers an unopened temple. Arthur senses it (one character calls his spirits "his chimeras"), then collapses. As the tombaroli get to work opening the seal, Rohrwacher cuts, impossibly, inside, to show you the colours that leave the walls and objects as the men break in. It feels like the film's form discovers the temple, too, like a secret between me and the image. The temple is full of artefacts, but they only have time to break the head off a large, priceless statue. As the neck breaks, Arthur cries. Does it belong to everyone or no one? Rohrwacher shoots in three film formats to excavate cinema's material past, too. Rossellini's casting is part of this project. Her presence points to a recent cinema's past, and as she ages, she looks more and more like her mother, Ingrid Bergman. Another past. By the time Arthur wanders back to Italia near the end of the film, she's built the abandoned train station up into a community, a place for women and children to live. It belongs to everyone and no one.

Review by: Harrison Wade

A glowing tribute to Hayao Miyazaki's closest collaborators, *The Boy and the Heron* translates the devastating loss of a grieving child into a phantasmagorical tale of feathered spiritual guides, pyrokinetic protectors, and carnivorous parakeets.

Near the end of the Second World War, a young Mahito Maki (Soma Santoki) retreats from Tokyo with his father and stepmother, leaving the site of his birthmother's tragic death after a hospital bombing. His nightmares of her final moments and close encounters with a combative grey heron lead him to an abandoned tower, where he meets an unsettling cast of characters at once part cruel fable and rousing fairy-tale. Playful warawara float about on shimmering seas, interrupted by bloodied pelicans desperate for survival; Mahito's stepmother sleeps in a dark delivery room that floods with razor-sharp paper as he reaches out for her. Miyazaki pairs Joe Hisaishi's melancholic and buoyant melodies with a familiar pacifist's ethic as Mahito eventually accepts the precarious balance between malice and compassion in a violent world.

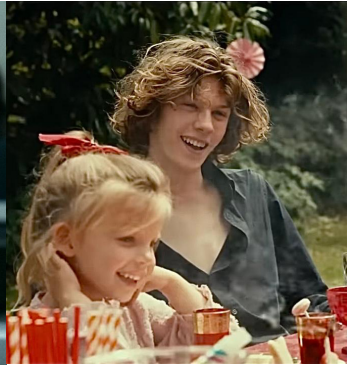
The film inspires a near-spiritual faith in the children of the next generation as forgers of an optimistic future. With corporatized animation primarily foregrounding intertextual nostalgia over sincere storytelling, viewers can grasp hold of *The Boy and the Heron* as a key reminder of the intimate alliances that surround us, to forgo the residual guilt around the love we may at times feel we do not deserve.

Review by: Jade Courchense

Red Rooms (2023)



dir. Pascale Plante



VIEW

In his true crime-inspired horror film *Red Rooms*, Pascale Plante diagnoses our collective obsession with the figure of the serial killer via the ‘groupie’ and fan culture typical of its media image. Of course, the macabre has always enjoyed itself as a perverse object of intrigue – that which scares us but more powerfully draws us in. Yet, Plante, through his interest in the fold of the digital in this phenomenon, manages to unearth a specifically contemporary syndrome that plagues our popular culture. The true-crime fad has spawned in various forms: podcasts, miniseries, and feature films, among others, and perhaps offers an obvious line of shallow critique. Plante manages to avoid the easy didactic tone so many other films convey and locates something far more disturbing than shallow criticism can offer.

Plante is a true contemporary filmmaker and thus begins *Red Rooms* with a long single take of a courtroom, the setting of a high-profile case of suspected serial killer Ludovic Chevalier (Maxwell McCabe-Lokos), who is accused of filming snuff films wherein he tortures and murders schoolgirls. He later distributes them on the dark web via sites known as ‘red rooms.’ Plante is largely uninterested in the legal dressings on display in this durational oneer but chooses instead to focus on the spectacle of the serial-killer sympathizers watching the proceedings, embodied by Kelly-Anne (Julieta Gariépy) and Clementine (Laurie Babin). This is not a snappy courtroom-drama pleasure vehicle or the suspense and faux-ambiguity of *Anatomy of Fall*; instead, there’s a disturbing mystery as to the desires of Kelly-Anne and her counterpart in this twisted case.

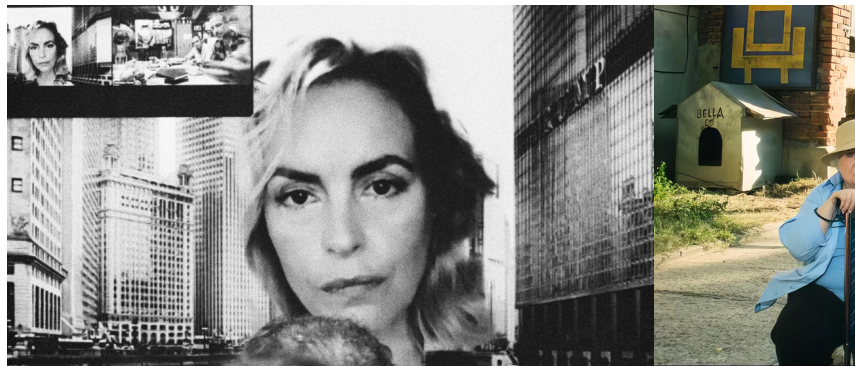
As such, we don’t overstay our welcome in the courtroom and, instead, are soon following the ritualized lifeworld of Kelly-Anne, a high-value photo model by day and a crypto-trading internet gambler by night. Kelly-Anne camps in an alley next to the courtroom overnight to secure her place in the audience early each morning, waking up to a monochrome blue, bruised image of a street. Plante constructs contemporary ex-

pressionism by recalling Weine’s somnambulist in *Caligari* through his psychological observation of our current times. Kelly-Anne’s mysterious yet clinical interest in the Chevalier case is juxtaposed by Clementine, whose unapologetic public defense of Chevalier (Clementine phones into a ‘news’ show covering the case only to be humiliated live on air) lays bare her perverted and ultimately confused love for what she sees as the wrongfully accused man. Plante finds in his two characters the archetypal coin of the true-crime obsessed: an a-type neurotic in Kelly-Anne, unfeeling and psychopathic seeking out the perverse pleasure in the morbid, and Clementine, emotionally unstable and consumed by a conspiracy-sick mistrust of the institutions that govern us. The two form a doomed kinship as their worldviews are set to collide, which offers a mirror for an audience desiring the awful.

In this dual character study, Plante manages to unearth something that plagues us today, elucidating the digital’s exasperating role in this archetypal encounter. Opting not for the easy cynicism or nihilism of our times, Plante stares directly in the face of these cultural (un)realities: the trauma left by the tear between virtual and the actual (was it ever really entirely distinct?), yet still manages to locate redemption for Kelly-Anne and by proxy us. That is not to say we aren’t guilty; we are all implicated in this dynamic. The uncanny rips through *Red Room*’s form, giving way to a fantastic terror, inditing us and, more importantly, the cinema itself.

Review by: Will Riley

Do Not Expect Too Much from



Last Summer (2023)

dir. Catherine Breillat



Last Summer (L'Été dernier), as Catherine Breillat's cinematic comeback after ten years of hiatus, might appear too conventional to be interesting: the film can be easily summarized as a clichéd story about the incestuous relationship between Anne (Léa Drucker), a well-established Parisian lawyer and her 17-year-old stepson Théo (Samuel Kircher). A remake of the 2019 Danish film *Queen of Hearts*, *Last Summer* delves deep into its dramatic, predictable narrative that makes it seem like the least transgressive among Breillat's oeuvre. However, if *Last Summer* appears to be a cheesy commentary on the fragility of trust and love's destructive transfigurations, its Breillatian idiosyncrasy is maintained through the film's frustratingly opaque attitude towards its own cinematic reality.

Radu Jude's *Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World* pivots on moments of brilliance many will be quick to label "Godardian". That this film was produced the year following famed auteur Jean Luc-Godard's death is no coincidence, as Jude's homage is poignant and touching, and most certainly felt, as what might be the most important sequence of the film, a six minute silent montage of graves along a Romanian highway, fittingly evokes Godard's *Weekend*, itself an apocalyptic takedown of what was once contemporary.

Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World, though, is just that, as the film's prescient look at transnational capital amidst the disarray of a dynamistic and perverse media culture is as simple as it is profound. The homage in Jude's film works, though, because it has everything to do with the contemporary world, a world rife with empty pastiche chasing after the hopes and dreams of yesterday. The film is not interested in living in the past. Rather, Jude's interrogation of today is as earnest as it is critical. As we follow overworked gig-economy worker Angela who navigates the aimless and traffic-laden hellscape of postmodernity, played brilliantly by Ilinca Manolache, we are exposed to a milieu that is equal parts hilarious and devastating. Finally, as careful audiences will recognize, Jude's critique of the cinema itself as a tool of capital that can flexibly rework its images in service of capital's own fixity is what Godard would have fittingly appreciated most.

Review by: Liam Riley

The film's affectively ambiguous moments parallel its overall cathartic effort to thwart intellectualization of our choices as humans, foregrounding Breillat's acerbic, unrelenting account on shame, self-denial and so-called "truth" of life. The director ventures into a daring probe of morality and carnality of erotic desires by audaciously letting viewers in on her authentic lies - as she quotes Jean Cocteau's famous remark: "I am a lie that always tells the truth." Indeed, in *Last Summer*, everything is openly out there - love, lust, boredom, disgust, hate, revulsion, even the secrets, with no intentional stylistic or narrative clean-up. Sex scenes are laborious, un-erotic - Breillat's disturbingly claustrophobic close-up of faces in her portrayal of sex replaced her signature bodily transgression with a naked and more indecent portrayal of humanity accentuated by the human face. In fact, the film is not subversive at all; everything is "clichéd" to a default.

Yet *Last Summer* is a distinctively transgressive film in the sense that it fundamentally questions the veracity and power of transgressiveness in all art. Eventually, the film comments on a "symbolic reality" of the cinematic image that betrays itself - can't we lie to ourselves? Can't images lie to their own indexicality? If *Last Summer* appears to be telling a story about truth with an obsolete vocabulary of moralism, a closer look might suggest something grimmer but more interesting: that nobody is innocent or guilty, and life makes victims of us all.

Review by: Claire Cao

Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World (2023)



dir. Radu Jude



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