Search Results:
The Subject of Google in 2010s Culture

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Abstract

Is Googling a banal activity or something more insidious? *Search Results: The Subject of Google in 2010s Culture* argues that users are employing search engines for reasons that parallel how and why subjects first underwent psychoanalysis: to deal with the question of desire. Nevertheless, the dissertation pinpoints a key divergence between Google and psychoanalysis as therapeutic institutions. While psychoanalysis aspires toward the changing of the subject through separating them from the function of the Other, Google has different aspirations. The search engine stabilizes the subject through the accessibility of a limitless desire, binding them to an algorithmic Other. It produces a socialized rather than singular desire, along with a form of subjectivity that can be more easily controlled by digital capitalism's mode of mediation. A deep-seated fear of taking responsibility for one's desire leads subjects to the search engine, where difficult truths demonstrated by psychoanalytic theory and praxis such as split subjectivity, the inexistence of the sexual relationship, the finality of death, and the fraudulent signifier of Whiteness can be negated through the substitute objects of search results. Since the abundance of search results that Google offers conceals the limit of desire, the dissertation turns to several cultural objects that demonstrate this limit, when Google is directed at oneself, others, the dead, and the past. Chapter 1 examines how the protagonists of Megan Boyle and Tao Lin's autofiction novels search through the internet to find themselves, a search which results in the splitting of them from themselves. Chapter 2 turns to obsessive searches for others in novels by Caroline Kepnes and Olivia Sudjic, in which the subject's own alterity is both hidden and searched for behind the digital screen of the other. Searching again conceals more than it reveals in Chapter 3, where three horror films display the dead being buried (and later unburied) with the material of search results. Finally, Chapter 4 discusses the centrality of the unconscious search for Indigeneity to the settler colonial project, which is psychoanalyzed by several Indigenous cultural objects, illuminating the impossible result of this search, and its historical consequences.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; Google; digital film; digital fiction; search engine; desire

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Figure 1: Screengrab of @AriSchulman Twitter post

The key contention of this dissertation is that we Google not to find, but to distance ourselves from finding. What do we fear finding? We fear finding that what we are searching for, the answer to our desire, does not exist. We fear an elemental truth of psychoanalysis, that the subject perceives that they have lost something of themselves upon entering the field of language, but this lost object does not exist, or more accurately, only exists in being lost. Nevertheless, the subject posits this object as existing out in the world, promising an unparalleled experience of satisfaction or meaning, allowing them to move through the world—or through the internet—via the nudge of desire. Within the internet, users employ search engines like Google both to find their object of desire, and simultaneously, to lose their object of desire. The object becomes digitally distanced from the subject, buried within the depths of the internet, thereby concealing its impossibility of attainment. Finding this lost object involves being confronted with the anxiety-provoking void of one's desire—the previously coveted object suddenly appears disgusting and alien—but searching for this lost object produces the pleasure of forever nearing the object, an asymptotic building of intensity.

Rather than being stable, the lost object must be continually reinterpreted, reimagined, and relocated. What is it that I desire? What do others desire? What is it that social authority desires (of me)? Search engines (understood broadly as sites where a user types a query into a search box) are machines of interpretation, whether it is the user investigating what they or others desire through an abundance of search results, or whether it is the search engine interpreting the user's desire through an abundance of data provided by their searches. These twin efforts at interpretation merge: the user's desire is the desire of the search engine.

If for Jacques Lacan "the subject is desire" (*Seminar VI* 370), and if desire for Bruce Fink is a "constant search" (*The Lacanian Subject* 90), then the subject is a constant searching. If the subject is searching, then the search engine becomes an engine for subjectivity. Nevertheless, the plethora of searches executable through the internet does not expand the possibilities of subjectivity so much as it reduces them. In a vision of the near future, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) in *Her* (Jonze 2013) scrolls through the results of his "standard search" of an erotic chat room, saying "next, next, next," just as in the scene prior, he scrolls through search results for news content, saying "next, next, next." The search engine standardizes and regulates the subject's searching, teaching the subject how to desire in a way profitable to the platforms of digital capitalism: that is, endlessly. Users enjoy participating in the fantasy of the search result, enabling the dominance of digital capitalism through the subject position it provides, one where the subject's constant searches can be met instantaneously with results. The anxiety of determining one's object of desire is outsourced to algorithms, which promise results scientifically selected for each user. Even if unsatisfying at the level of the individual result, the search engine's strength lies in numbers, enabling an inexhaustible search of exhausting content.

This dissertation orientates itself toward breaking down the subject position produced by the search engine, and the changing of the subject to one emancipated from digital capitalism. If the subject is a search, the transformation of the subject can only take place at the level of its primary mode of searching. Rather than go around search engines, this dissertation, along with the various cultural objects that it analyzes, orientates itself toward the traversal of the fantasy of the search result. Traversing the fantasy involves locating the lack in the search result, what answers it fails to provide for the subject and the object of desire that it fails to deliver, signalling the limit of the search

engine. It is through this lack outlined within the search result that a new mode of subjectivity emerges in the form of a non-standard search, one that does not retreat to some ideal of subjectivity prior to the search engine, but rather is reborn from the search engine.

The Sublime Object of Google

The most visited site on the internet, Ed Finn characterizes the search engine of Google as occupying an "emergent role as chief architect of the Internet" (159), because of its popularity as "a medium for living, a pathway to experience" in which "we are *all* telling our stories through [its] algorithms, all the time" (76). Simultaneously, Google is also telling a story through its users: the story of their desire. Many platforms other than Google thrive on facilitating user desire through the affordances of digital search, but this dissertation focuses on Google for its cultural monopoly of the field, often functioning at the very least as a gateway drug to search. This focus allows the dissertation a political target with which to engage rather than presenting an apolitical phenomenology of search. Not simply lamenting how Google is destroying subjectivity, this dissertation elucidates what leads the subject to Google. After the narrator of Lauren Oyler's novel *Fake Accounts* (2021) doomscrolls through the internet for hours, leaving her "spine curved," hands "clammy," and shoulders "tense and hunched up close to [her] ears" (217), she reflects how she had:

> recently seen a headline that claimed staring at screens too much wouldn't cause permanent blindness, so that was good, but there was also a sense in which such reassuring articles disappointed. It was easier to think of technology as something that was happening to [her] rather than acknowledge [she] was doing something with it. (217-8)

This dissertation attempts to answer this question of what are users doing with Google? What exactly are users searching for that Google processes over five billion searches a day?

Consulting Google's "Year in Search 2020" for Canada, the lists of top-10 searches mix the historical ("What is Coronavirus?") with the ephemeral ("What does WAP mean?"), the political ("Why was George Floyd stopped?") with the trivial ("Why did Kobe have 2 numbers?"), and necessity ("How to make hand sanitizer") with superfluity ("How to make whipped coffee"). "Year in Search" reflects a society split between calls to

urgent action and the endless distraction of internet information. Yet, viewing Google as a mirror of the user endorses the image that Google projects of itself, neglecting how Google subtly modifies and extends the desires of its users, by concealing the negativity at the core of desire. Historicizing search engines, Jodi Dean explains how they originally addressed the practical problem of locating "something in particular" within the internet's "fantasy of abundance" (41). While search engines promised to solve the chaos of abundance, they surreptitiously exacerbated the chaos, in a dialectical movement necessary to their continued success. How else to explain Google's fetishistic display of the number of results its engine has returned, often in the billions for a simple search—with unseen environmental costs[1]—when users will rarely look past the first few? The sublime object of the Google search is thus not a particular result the user wishes to attain, but the sea of results in which the exceptional object promises to appear. By furthering this dialectic in which a fantasy of abundance props up the serendipity of encountering the exceptional, search engines become more libidinally attractive.[2]

Gradually, Dean relates how search engines begin to fulfill a more therapeutic role, that of the "missing 'subject supposed to know'" (42), a position once inhabited by the psychoanalyst who could convincingly decipher the secret meaning of their analysand's words. To survive, search engines needed to know "not just how to find information, but the truth of the searcher's desire" who "might not know what they actually want" (Dean 42). Through successfully interpreting the signifiers typed in by users and therefore spelling out their desire to them, search engines grew in cultural power, becoming what Dean calls "the knower of our secrets, our desires" (42). A joke told by Slavoj Žižek can help explain the user's entrapment by Google. Sitting on a train, a Polish person demands from a Jewish person: "tell me, how do you Jews succeed in

[1] According to artist Joana Moll's CO2GLE project, Google as of 2018 "processes an approximate average of 47000 requests every second… which represents an estimated amount of 500 kg of CO2 emissions per second" ("CO2GLE" n.p.). As of 2019, Google "uses more electric power than entire countries" and its "use is doubling every three years or so" (Bryce n.p.).

[2] A Google-funded research project interviewed users who reported liking "to seek out information using their own Internet searches because they worried about naively accepting… sources of information they did not have a direct relationship with" (Toff & Nielsen 648). The researchers found that "the belief that 'the information is out there' is largely anchored in generalizations from the experience of using the Google search engine" in which "'Google' became a shorthand for this 'vast' expanse of information" (648). The abundance is the fantasmatic object of Google, not so much the results, which the interviewees often saw by contrast "as overwhelming: a 'black hole of information'" (650).

extracting from people the last small coin and in this way accumulate all your wealth?" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 68). The Jewish individual replies that he will tell him, but first asks for money, then asks for more money to hear the rest, and then asks for more money to hear a little more of the nonsensical ritual he is relaying. Finally, the Polish individual explodes, and the Jewish individual can point to the narration as the answer itself.

Žižek explains that the Polish individual is "caught in a relationship of transference" in which "the Jew embodies for him the 'subject [supposed] to know'" (68). Since Google occupies this transferential position in relation to the user today, Google and the user can be substituted into the joke.[3] Accordingly, the secret that the user desires to know "is already in the narration itself: in the way [Google], through [its] narration, captures the [user's] desire; in the way the [user] is absorbed in this narration and prepared to pay for it" (Žižek 69). The "fascinating 'secret' which drives us to follow [Google's] narration carefully is precisely the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the chimerical object of fantasy, the object causing our desire and at the same time—this is its paradox—posed retroactively by this desire" (Žižek 69). Desire is posited retroactively by the search result, rather than the user's desire being met with the search result.

Finding Satisfaction in the Search, Not the Result

How does psychoanalysis frame the problem of search differently from other fields of inquiry? Exemplifying one approach, journalist Emily Yoffe understands Google through evolutionary biology and neuroscience. According to Yoffe, "the basic drives for food, sex, and sleep have been overridden by a new need for endless nuggets of electronic information," with "the mammalian motivational engine" being rewired to "run in an endless loop," due to search engines having "created the perfect machines to allow us to seek endlessly" (n.p.). Like parents telling their iPad-addled children to go play outside, Yoffe argues that this "seeking needs to be turned off" occasionally, summoning the example of how a wild cat would not indulge in the "useless behavior" (n.p.) of

[3] The metaphorical linking of Žižek's joke and Google here also has a literal dimension, in that Google facilitates the same sort of racist investigations. In a study of Google's contribution to conspiracy theories, researchers interviewed an individual whose Google-driven investigations were "intimately tied up with the idea that a cabal of people—likely Jews, she had come to feel—were lying to her about the nature of the world" (Park, Zax & Goldberg 271).

eternally chasing a mouse since it would die. Regarding this position, it is important to keep in mind Žižek's contention that "*stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*" ("The Spectre of Ideology" 6). Taking social media breaks, complaining about the internet, going off the grid, are all activities that simply enhance the subject's attachment to the internet due to their perverse pleasure, instantiating the minimal gap of separation between the user and the internet that only reinforces the entrapment.

A further psychoanalytic challenge to Yoffe's argument involves the difference between animals and humans. Enlisting a larger cat into his point, Todd McGowan clarifies how "a lion can feel hungry and find satisfaction in eating a gazelle [but] for the subject of the signifier, no such object exists" (*Capitalism and Desire* 26). The subject searches for a satisfaction in the gazelle—or whatever they decide to consume—that transcends the gazelle. Moving from the satisfaction of food to sexual satisfaction (as search engine programmer Nathan (Oscar Isaac) says in *Ex Machina* (Garland 2014), "if a search engine's good for anything," it's pornography), Patrick Keilty writes how searching for "pornography online, like other pleasurable activities discussed within information-seeking studies, is in fact nonteleological and ultimately non-purposeful (despite an ostensible goal)," being more concerned with "the pleasure of the 'search' itself" (42). Invoking Sigmund Freud, Keilty identifies "the nature of desire itself" as cause, in which "desire is recursive… involv[ing] delay and deferral, and its satisfaction is illusive" (45). In contrast to the animal, the speaking being can and will doom themselves in enjoying the search over the result, especially when inhabiting a digital "environment [in which] the endless availability of the search… supersedes finding an object" (Clough n.p.). With pornography, this fantasy of abundance papers over what Jacob Johanssen calls the still "unbridgeable gap between a desire for a particular sexual scenario and what is offered by porn" (181). Somewhat frighteningly, there is no guarantee for the user's desire in the almost 4 billion results that Google brings up for "porn." The search acts as a coping mechanism, allowing the user to continue to desire through result after result, and not confront the inexistence of what they are searching for.[4]

[4] This point does not only apply to the user's search for self-gratification through pornography, but also the user's romantic search for a partner. Activity on dating apps like Tinder surged to new highs during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite social distancing rules prohibiting contact, leading

Google's algorithms know how users desire, more than users themselves know (or want to know). On the front end of Google's marketing, Ganaele Langlois articulates how Google has transitioned from the field of "knowledge and information" toward "the psychic level of desire and satisfaction" (85). She references the 2010 Superbowl commercial for Google called "Parisian Love," in which a user is shown navigating their life through Google queries: "a search for study abroad programs in Paris… how to romance in French and where to take a date… how-to advice on long-distance relationships… how to find a job in Paris, a church to get married in, and ultimately how to assemble a crib" (85). As Langlois explains, Google begins "fulfilling a psychosocial function by bringing in social order and individual satisfaction" (85), becoming a meaning machine that operates on an "intimate" (86) level with users through its delivery of personalized results for their searches. In Jonah Berger's retelling of the making of "Parisian Love," he describes the marketers' rationale:

> Why is search important? Because people want to find information quickly. Why do they want to do that? So they can get answers to what they are looking for. Why do they want those answers? So they can connect with people, achieve their goals, and fulfill their dreams. Now that's starting to get more emotional. (*Contagious* 203)

Alternatively, now that is starting to get more about desire. Although Google promises to provide meaning and satisfaction for its users, Matthew Flisfeder contends that its algorithm instead offers a lure, as it "learns not to give us the object of our desire immediately—the thing we (think) we want—but instead prevents us from obtaining the object—keeps it constantly at a distance," thus permitting the subject to "continue to search" (105). Or "Search On" as "Parisian Love" concludes. In this facilitation of unconscious satisfaction, Flisfeder explains how platforms like Google "combine automation and entertainment into a perpetual motion machine that produces surplus value through the luring combustion of surplus-enjoyment" (147). Users enjoy experiencing the doom of their desire in a commodified and unconsciously satisfying form, while Google reifies the structure of the user's desire so that it can be sold to advertisers.

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to the invention of the term "doomswiping" (Iovine n.p). As one victim of doomswiping reports: "I open up the app with some kind of intention… but the swiping just becomes another way to stare at a screen and not think about anything" (Iovine n.p). Both activities work to quiet anxieties over the existence of the sexual relationship. This topic will return in Chapter 2.

The Subject Supposed to Google

Google's facilitation of the repetitive searches of its users materially transforms the user and the world. Ed Finn imparts the pervasiveness of its influence:

> search is not just a system that leaps into action for a fraction of a second here or there [but] a persistent, highly complex organism that simultaneously influences the shape of the Internet, drives new innovations in machine learning, distributed computing and various other fields, and modifies our own cognitive practices. (42)

This organism parasitizes the user as host, with Google co-founder Larry Page musing in 2001 that the company's goal involves how "everything you've ever heard or seen or experienced will become searchable… your whole life will be searchable" (qtd. in Zuboff 192). The subject is broken down into a series of search results, sometimes accessible to a potential employer, or sometimes accessible to the American government to coordinate a drone strike (Chamayou 48). This inhabitation of the subject by search has cultural effects as well, with Safiya Umoja Noble relating how "men's desires and usage of search is able to influence the values that surround women's identities in search engines," particularly marginalized individuals such as Black women, who are "commodified," "pornified," and "naturaliz[ed]… as sexual objects" (17). Structural racism and sexism of the past is converted into spectacle, as the invasive organism of search only strives to make individuals more and more clickable, thereby spreading itself.

At the level of the world, Benjamin Bratton similarly describes an organism that dominates its environment, writing how "Google's armatures, its internal and external interfaces, operate all up and down… the global space of planetary computation," shaping it according to "its particular ambitions and strategies" (34). Google transforms not only the internet, but the world itself: "Google's mission statement, 'to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful,' changes meaning when the world itself is seen as *being* information, such that to organize all the information is to organize all the world" (Bratton 87). Likewise, Shoshana Zuboff relates how Google aggregates physical "spaces… into a seamless flow of searchable information, sights, and sounds in much the same way that Google once aggregated web pages for indexing and searching" (399). More and more, Google does not simply represent the world, but rather produces the world. Eventually, Bratton warns that there will be "no more innocent outside… only a theoretically recombinant inside" (38). The

evasive immateriality of the object at the end of user's searches fuels the development of a massive material apparatus designed for its representation. Once a way of finding a cookie recipe, search ultimately totalizes the user and the world, both of which fade from existence—for better or worse—the less they are searchable.

Immersed within this massive system, the user might experience what Sianne Ngai describes as "find[ing] that they are small subjects caught in larger systems extending beyond their comprehension and control" leading to a "disposition to theorize… aligned with paranoia" (299). In this theorizing, the subject aspires toward what Fredric Jameson calls the cognitive map: "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (*Postmodernism* 51). Jameson constructs his theory of cognitive mapping from Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* (1960), which emphasizes urban "legibility" (3) to safeguard the subject from the "mishap of disorientation" where a "sense of anxiety and even terror" befalls an individual "completely lost" (4) in a city. Jameson adapts this "mental map of city space" to a "mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms" ("Cognitive Mapping" 353), while gesturing toward aesthetic representations that could lend a comparable legibility to the latter. Along these lines, this dissertation focuses on representations that in some way address the subject's problem of being lost in Google.

Unfortunately, novelist Tom McCarthy proclaims that Google dominates today's aesthetic field, "performing writers' essential task of working through the fragmentations of old orders of experience and representation, [while] coming up with radical new forms to chart and manage new, emergent ones" (n.p.). At its most basic level, cognitive mapping appears undercut from its grounding in problems of urban navigation by Google apps like Maps and Earth. Discussing these apps, Bratton notes their production of "an absolute frame" through which to view a "self-evident image of totality" (86), both at the urban and global levels. More significantly, Google's search bar functions as an absolute frame, manufacturing micro-totalities to serve as the worldviews of their users. At an unconscious level, Google search functions as a barred frame, through which users can enjoy pursuing the secret to the system without worrying about attaining it, finding only imaginary substitutes. If capitalism functions as an "absolute… which defies representation" (Toscano & Kinkle 53), then Google functions as an absolute frame

which invites representation. The unholy alliance of these two social orders twists the problem of representing totality topologically, in which the totality's representation is located on the same surface as the totality itself.[5]

Rather than revolutionary responses to disorientation, Google churns out what Jameson calls the "degraded figure" or "desperate attempt" ("Cognitive Mapping" 356) of cognitive mapping: conspiracy theory. Just as Google responds to the positive emotions of the heteronormative searcher in "Parisian love," Google also responds to negative emotions, such as what Sianne Ngai describes as today's "species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system" (299). As Jigsaw (a subsidiary of Google) researchers found, googling fulfills an "*emotional* role" for conspiracy theorists through its facilitation of agential investigations that "helped them make emotional sense of a world where they felt marginalized, disenfranchised, and alone" (Park, Zax & Goldberg 271). Not only a problem limited to conspiracy theorists, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun describes a more general phenomenon in which "the desire to map [is] not contrary to capitalism but rather integral to its current form, especially since it is through our mappings that we ourselves are mapped" (*Programmed Visions* 75). For Chun, "*our historically novel position*" is not a result of "*ignorance and powerlessness, but rather our determination and our drive to know*" (75). Repetitive attempts at grasping the system through Google fuel the system.

Indirectly countering Chun's argument, Todd McGowan posits that the lesson of psychoanalysis is that "rather than desiring to know, the subject desires not to know and organizes its existence around the avoidance of knowledge" (*Enjoying What We Don't Have* 17). This knowledge threatens to implicate the subject's enjoyment in not attaining the object, in forever moving toward the secret of the system, forever researching. This knowledge cannot be googled, since McGowan writes how paradoxically "one can access it only when *not* seeking it" (18). The conscious subject will do everything they can to avoid encountering the structure of their desire, to stay moving through desire.

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[5] As an example, this dissertation is part of this dilemma of representation, rather than merely surveying it, due to my usage of Google search, Google Scholar, Google Books, Google Drive, Google Translate, Google Chrome, and YouTube. Beyond the project's writing, its reception is also intruded upon by Google. Upon sending the dissertation to someone unfamiliar with psychoanalytic theory, they told me that they had tried reading it, but had googled my reference to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which led to more googling, and them falling into a "fascinating" rabbit hole instead.

Rather than the drive to know, Google captures the drive to not know, luring users pleasurably into a labyrinth with no exit. Due to this shift in subjective experience, the anxiety of disorientation becomes an aim instead of an evil.

Though cognitive mapping appears to aim away from the anxiety of disorientation toward a representational pedagogy, Jameson articulates the project as firstly an articulation of a "gap, a rift, between existential experience and scientific knowledge," concealed by an ideological formation that bears "the function of somehow inventing a way of articulating those two distinct dimensions with each other" (*Postmodernism* 53). Specifically, Jameson outlines this gap as existing between the "monadic 'point of view'" of the individual subject, and the "realm of abstract knowledge" supported by "the subject supposed to know" (53). Through Google's occupation of this position, there is an alignment of the distinct dimensions, an unprecedented eclipse of the gap. To clarify, Langlois describes how Google "returns results based on [a user's] specific profile," producing the illusion of "first-person perspectives" (31) on knowledge. Users can look through the gaze of the subject supposed to know, themselves embodying the necessarily empty position or "structural void" (*Postmodernism* 53) that secures the Other as a field of knowledge. In a time when Google occludes this gap between subject and subject supposed to know, cognitive mapping is more necessary than ever, and must aim at a disorientating dissolution of this occlusion. Cognitive mapping must reshape a Leftist social media discourse dominated by "Google is free" and "let me Google that for you" responses to the political disorientation of others. These responses are flawed in that they are premised on the fantasy that it is a lack of knowledge, not a surplus of enjoyment, that is the primary political problem. Since Google is a vehicle of enjoyment more than knowledge, these responses only compound the problem rather than rectifying it.

The Void as Commodity

A more serious challenge to cognitive mapping emerges through the claims of Google rendering capitalism and its analysis residual. For Jameson, cognitive mapping "obviously stands or falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped" ("Cognitive Mapping" 356), meaning nothing other than the absolute of capital itself. With the style of a battle in the comments, he declares how "anyone who believes that [capitalism does] not set

absolute barriers and limits to social changes and transformations undertaken in it… is living in an alternative universe" (354). Not without some controversy, Shoshana Zuboff argues that capitalism has been fundamentally altered by Google, in which the capitalist "means of production are subordinated to an increasingly complex and comprehensive 'means of behavioral modification,'" that represents the emergence of "a new species of power" (22). With a more obvious polemic, McKenzie Wark proclaims that capitalism is dead, overtaken by "a postcapitalist mode of production, with a ruling class of a different kind, the vectoralist class" (143) whose "avatar" is none other than "Google's Sergey Brin" (84). Contrary to the strict exploitation of the capitalist, Wark writes that the vectoralist class beneficently gifts the user "access to the location of a piece of information for which [they] are searching" (102), while quietly facilitating the "extraction of… *surplus information*, out of individual workers and consumers, in order to build predictive models which further subordinate all activity to the same information political economy" (27-8). For Wark, the technological complexity of this new mode of production cannot be grasped "using the received hermeneutic conceptual categories" of Marx, which were developed in "an era of steam" (108).

Consequently, Jameson's statement that "the technology of contemporary society is… mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping… the whole new decentered global network" (*Postmodernism* 37-8) of capital is reversed. Marxism become an inadequate shorthand for delineating "a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp" (*Postmodernism* 38), belonging to Google. Alexander Galloway suggests as much when he relocates the "dilemma of unrepresentability" (*The Interface Effect* 86) at the heart of cognitive mapping from capital to the "information society" (99). Looking specifically at Google's search algorithm, it is unrepresentable even to Google itself, due to being developed by what Yuval Noah Harari describes as "huge teams" in which "each member understands just one part of the puzzle, and nobody really understands the algorithm as a whole" (845). Through "machine learning and artificial neural networks," the algorithm adopts "strategies that escape the human mind" (Harari 845), becoming more unrepresentable. Problematically, Google becomes both what most needs to be cognitively mapped, as

well as the dominant means of cognitive mapping, so long as Google is not what is being cognitively mapped.[6]

Nevertheless, there are still some complications with Wark's analysis of Google as a new mode of production, since Google does not "actually make their own products" (87), but more so mediates the informational products of others through the vector of its algorithms, as well as massive server farms. Though Google rises to prominence as an organizer, Zuboff notes that its search results are still "the contingent products of the specific economic interests that drive the action from within the belly of the machine" (117), rendering it at the least still deeply entangled with the capitalist system. As will be elaborated in Chapter 3, the term mode of production by which Wark historically situates Google leads to issues which the term mode of mediation developed by Galloway looks to resolve. Reading Google as a mode of mediation allows for a deeper libidinal analysis of the software's appeal to the subject of desire, since it is a given society's cultural mediation of object *a* that produces desire in the subject. The psychic appeal of Google can confuse critics, summarized by Zuboff as the "confound[ing]" question of why "with so many people rejecting the practices of surveillance capitalism… how is it that this market form has been able to succeed?" (652). When Wark's analysis touches upon the libidinal, she writes how every "expressed desire" within the search-box is converted into "a unique vector through a layered space that can fulfill an almost infinite number of desires, so long as they all take the form of a user asking an interface to satisfy a demand with a commodity" (25). In her description of searching, Wark notes how Google reduces desire to demand. Yet, desire resides as a surplus to every demand, being fueled by its attempted reduction. Lacan distinguishes demand from desire, in that even though "desire uses demand as its vehicle," desire is "nevertheless beyond demand" (*Écrits* 634). It cannot be fulfilled by any object or commodity, and its subject is unconscious rather than conscious.

[6] Clint Burnham discusses how Google refused to grant artist John Gerrard permission to photograph even the exterior of one of its server farms. According to Burnham, Gerrard's resulting images of the farm, showing "pipes, edges, the blue prairie sky… grass, low-slung buildings, lights" show us "nothing—and that is the point" (Does the Internet Have an Unconscious? 165). The images engage the unrepresentability of Google, constituting a more effective cognitive map than today's proliferation of accessible "images of a server building's interior, all glittering and hi-tech… through a 360˚ view" (Burnham 164).

Not a mere quibble with Wark's argument, locating a gap between conscious demand and unconscious desire has the effect of linking Google's mode of mediation to that of capitalism, in a historical relation defined more by continuity than rupture. As opposed to fulfilling desires, Todd McGowan argues that "capitalism has the effect of sustaining subjects in a constant state of desire" in which "we are constantly on the edge of having our desire realized, but never reach the point of realization" (*Capitalism and Desire* 11). For McGowan, capitalism alters the status of the lost object for which the subject searches, in which it ceases to be constitutive, becoming instead contingent. Through the commodity-form, McGowan explains how the subject of capitalism can move "from object to object in order to avoid confronting the fact that it misses the same lost object again and again" (32), since "when the subject successfully obtains the object that it seeks, this object ceases to embody the lost object" (150). Though aimed at capitalism more broadly, McGowan's argument finds its true target with search engines, and their libidinal underside of doomscrolling.

The term doomscrolling rose to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, describing the compulsive habit of endlessly scrolling through digital content. Despite its sudden burst onto the scene, doomscrolling did not designate a novel phenomenon so much as retroactively name a libidinal undercurrent that had existed since the introduction of search engines. Initially, searching appears counterposed to doomscrolling, in that the user has some idea what they are looking for. Doomscrolling moves against this logic: "we are looking for something, even though we are not sure exactly what it is" (Cosslett n.p.). If the search engine serves the pleasure principle (such as searching Google Maps for takeout), then doomscrolling functions beyond the pleasure principle, constituting a "masochistic practice" (Jennings n.p.) or "roll toward annihilation" (Watercutter n.p.). These two behaviours often mingle digitally despite their differences, with a search leading to doomscrolling, and vice versa. In reading these two behaviours together, the precise results produced through the search engine gain a newfound indeterminacy, by being superimposed with the ambiguous object of doomscrolling. On the other side, doomscrolling becomes not without an object, to borrow some phrasing from Lacan's formulation of his most fundamental concept, the object *a*.

Doomscrolling brings to the surface the libidinal truth of the search engine's fantasy. Search engines transform the flatness of the digital screen into a depth model,

where there are windows to click through, descents to be made from Google Earth to street view, and truths not covered in the mainstream media to be excavated. Yet, there is no bottom to this depth; in scrolling to the end of the search results for a query, new ones keep appearing. The libidinal abyss of the search engine precedes that of the doomscroll. Despite doomscrolling—or doomsearching—appearing as an unsatisfying activity, it functions within the capitalist logic described by McGowan of providing "satisfaction for its subjects while at the same time hiding the awareness of this satisfaction from them" (14). Rather than breaking from capitalism, Google finds a solution to the potential suffocation of the subject's desire through what Matthew Flisfeder calls the inception of the object *a* "into the algorithmic," where "the power of the algorithm is its ability to constantly stage and then to displace desire" (147). Consequently, capitalist enjoyment only accelerates in a virtual space where the bad infinite of consumption spirals into the depths of the internet, which Google continues to dig out.

The revolution of Google involves bringing the structures of the object *a* and the commodity-form into alignment. At a theoretical level, there has always been what Henry Krips calls a "structural similarity" (21) between the object *a* and the commodity-form. As Žižek elaborates, "we search in vain for [object *a*] in positive reality because it has no positive consistency—because it is just an objectification of… a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier" and "it is the same with a commodity: we search in vain among its positive properties for the feature which constitutes its value" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 104-5). While Žižek relates how "capitalism is the first and only social order that incorporates into its functioning the basic paradox of human desire" (*Hegel in a Wired Brain* 334) via the commodity-form, Google inaugurates the first social order that does not merely incorporate this paradox, but rather is fully structured by this paradox. McGowan writes that "psychoanalysis emerges in response to the subject's experience of abundance, not its encounter with scarcity" (*Capitalism and Desire* 282), an emergence even more relevant to Google's fantasy of abundance. Rather than psychoanalysis struggling to keep up with Google, it becomes theoretically necessary in an era in which the subject experiences accelerated access to desire. Through its inviting and innocuous search bar, Google commodifies the doom of desire. With its rise to prominence, Google reveals this doom as the ultimate commodity. Rather than simply bearing a structural likeness, the object *a* and the commodity-form merge

through Google search's highly profitable capture of the user's desire. Google describes its ambitions in 2013 as geared toward an "End of Search" (Finn 72) in which the user's desires would be fulfilled for them before they knew they existed, thus selling what McGowan calls "the perfect commodity [that] promises an end to the search" (25). The end of search will signal the end of capitalism as we enjoy it, though this is a receding horizon Google and its users will likely only endlessly scroll toward.

Big Other of Media Theory or Psychoanalysis? Yes Please!

Through the foregrounding of a psychoanalytic understanding of the subject of desire as pure lack or negativity, this dissertation moves against the specter of *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999) that looms over analyses of surveillance capitalism, in which Google will ultimately simulate subjectivity for users, while transforming them into mere batteries for Google's development. To look at a prominent example, Shoshana Zuboff predicts a future in which "we are exiles from our own behavior" and made into "human natural resources" (195). An early scene from *The Matrix* captures the structuring of search that leads to this future. After conducting some surveillance, malevolent computer programs called Agents identify Neo (Keanu Reeves) as a target for recruitment by the human resistance. Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) states, "we'll need a search running," as the camera descends into a telephone's mouthpiece, the method of exit from the Matrix. Everything goes dark, then the camera re-exits through the phosphorescent green code of Neo's computer screen, which gradually crystallizes into the glittering word: "Searching." On the screen, a search engine ceaselessly scrolls through the internet while Neo sleeps. The screen's restless movement casts flickers of light and shadow on Neo's sleeping face. Is he dreaming, or is the computer dreaming for him? Either way, the search is unconscious, obeying the logic of a dream, in which Lacan states "our position… is profoundly that of someone who does not see" but rather "follows" (*Seminar XI* 75). This logic is accentuated when a message appears on Neo's computer informing him to "follow the white rabbit," which he does, not "know[ing] if [he's] awake or still dreaming." At the end of his dream, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) informs Neo that his search is "for an answer" to "the question that drives us" of "what is the Matrix?"

In Žižek's reading of the film, he identifies the Matrix as the big Other, "the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us" and "pulls the strings" of the

subject which is here “externalized in the really existing Mega-Computer” (“The Matrix” n.p.). The logic of the above shot from *The Matrix* establishes that the seemingly opposite sides of search are located along the same topological surface, as demonstrated by the camera’s movement: the very vector of Neo’s search for an exit constitutes the same vector by which he is searched for (and captured) by the agents. Similarly, in today’s era of surveillance capitalism, Zuboff writes that “the precise moment at which our [search] needs are met is also the precise moment at which our lives are plundered for behavioral data” (105). Every search makes one more searchable. The omnipotence of the Matrix finds its apparent realization in the era of surveillance capitalism. For Zuboff, “surveillance capitalism is the puppet master… that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior,” through “its millions, billions, and trillions of sensate, actuating, computational eyes and ears” (717-8). Despite the intimacy of this surveillance, Zuboff contends that “there is no relationship between Big Other and its otherized objects,” with Big Other exhibiting a “*radical indifference*” in which it “does not care what we think, feel, or do” (718). Big Other concerns itself only with expansion, developing what Alenka Zupančič calls the “‘masturbatory’ self-enjoyment” (*What IS Sex?* 32) of the Other, an aspect neglected (at the subject’s peril) when the Other is conceived as a neutral and rational machine. In this radical indifference, Zuboff’s Big Other resembles the big Other of psychoanalytic theory. Joan Copjec writes that when the subject encounters “the gaze of the Other” as understood by Lacan, they “meet not a seeing eye but a blind one [which] is not clear or penetrating, not filled with knowledge or recognition [but] is clouded over and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment” (36). Despite this similarity, Copjec and Zuboff’s big Others diverge in terms of how they construct subjectivity.

For Zuboff, the Big Other and the subject are substantial entities in a material struggle with each other. It is a conflict in which one can take sides, as Zuboff does, on the side of the subject. Zuboff’s Big Other is so substantial that it threatens to eradicate subjects, “poach[ing] our behavior for surplus and leav[ing] behind all the meaning lodged in our bodies, our brains, and our beating hearts, not unlike the monstrous slaughter of elephants for ivory” (719). Paradoxically, this threat of subjectivity’s eradication is matched with an account of the subject possessing an interiority that Big Other can never access. Subjectivity is a “clash of oxygen and ember” (Zuboff 892) that supernaturally resists digitization. The subject resides in the “ultimate sanctuary” of “the

inward space of lived experience," where "*the will to will* is the inner act that secures us as autonomous beings" (Zuboff 555-6). Big Other threatens to break into this sanctuary and ravage it, due to its unstoppable desire for the subject: "surveillance capital cannot keep from wanting all of me as deep and far as it can go" (Zuboff 557). Against such positing of the subject as impenetrable interiority, Jamieson Webster ponders: "is there a way of thinking about the mind without reevoking, yet again, the trope of what is 'on the inside'?" ("Toward a Less-Than-Human Psychoanalysis" 19). Nevertheless, Zuboff is not alone in positing a discrete interiority that must be defended against the impositions of Big Other from outside. Ed Finn contends that Google has "barely begun to contend with the vast interiority of [its] users," pointing to the evidence that about 16 percent of all Google searches are completely new (75). Yet, the novelty of this engagement equally suggests that users have barely begun to contend with the enigma of Google. These definitions of subjectivity and the Big Other that paint a battle between interiority and imposing exteriority are complicated by Lacan's arrangement of the subject and the big Other through the topological figure of the Möbius strip, in which the two exist in a relation of extimacy generated by the signifier.

With extimacy, the exteriority of the signifier is what generates the interiority of the subject, so that at the core of the subject's inside, there is an outside. Lacan proposes that "what feeds the emergence of the signifier at the origin is the aim that the Other, the real Other, should not know" (*Seminar X* 63) of the subject. Paradoxically, the signifier arises as a way of concealing one's subjectivity from the Other, though it retroactively produces both the very thing that it conceals, along with the very thing being hidden from, through the signifier's function as screen. Neither the subject nor the Other exist without the screen of the signifier. The symbolic Other exists only as a "structural prop or function" (Burnham 160), positing a virtual figure under whose gaze the subject's acts can be registered as meaningful (or not). Simultaneously, the subject exists only in being "*cut off from*" (Copjec 36) the Other's gaze of recognition by the screen of the signifier, unable to have their subjectivity verified. In today's digital age, this screening function of the signifier finds its dominant mode of manipulation through the digital screen, whereby the subject negotiates with the Other, both in terms of searching for the Other, and in terms of being searched for by the Other.

The difference between Zuboff's digital Other and the psychoanalytic Other can be clarified by looking at how they frame the subject's game of hide-and-seek with the

Other. Responding to former Google CEO Eric Schmidt's infamous remark that "if you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place," Zuboff contends that "the real psychological truth is this: *if you've got nothing to hide, you are nothing*" (913). In the context of Zuboff's quote, the nothingness is pejorative, whereas it is the starting block for psychoanalysis. Defining a subjectivity resistant to its potential simulation by the digital, Jan De Vos states that while the computer of the Turing test can "pretend to be something that it is not… feigning that it is human although it is a machine… it cannot pretend that it is human in order to hide the fact that it is not" (44). While the computer screens its truth of being a machine, the subject screens "an absence… testifying to the disturbing truth that it is in the veil itself that the truth resides" (De Vos 44). With the advent of surveillance capitalism, the more general threat is not so much that subjects will be totally observed and unable to hide anything, but the opposite: the illusion that they can totally conceal themselves from the Other's gaze, through the manipulation of the screen. This illusion arises when a user looks at the digital profile surveillance capitalism has drawn up of them, or views a particularly poor recommendation from the algorithm, and is comforted by how little they are truly seen. Along these lines, Todd McGowan contends that "the ideological function of surveillance is not the elimination of privacy but the creation of subjects who see themselves only in terms of privacy" (*Capitalism and Desire* 67). Surveillance capitalism does not endanger the agalma the subject posits within itself, but rather leads to its military fortification, the defence of a treasure that does not exist.

For Žižek, the error lies in the superimposition of the symbolic Other and the digital Other: "we tend to project onto the digital machine which is part of material reality the dimension of the symbolic big Other, to treat it as a "subject supposed to know" (or not to know, i.e., the entity from which we succeed in hiding our intimate secrets)" (*Hegel in a Wired Brain* 348). The split between these two dimensions becomes apparent when a user deletes their search history, despite the reality that "Google maintains our search histories indefinitely" (Zuboff 35). Done only for the sake of appearances, this erasure is not directed at Google, but at the symbolic Other, though significantly this address to the latter passes through the apparatus of the former. The split emerges at a more social level when criticisms of bias—now coming from the Right more than the Left—are laid at the feet of Google's algorithm, amounting to what McKenzie Wark calls a "demand for a fairer algorithm, as if there could still be a neutral third party above our differences" (15).

Again, the address to the symbolic Other passes through the digital Other. In terms of Žižek's solution to this conundrum, he postulates that the "first task of the critique of ideology is… to reintroduce the distance between the two dimensions, to reduce the digital Other to the stupidity of a blind machine, to deprive it of the aura of a secret Master" (350). In addressing the gap that separates the digital Other from the symbolic Other, this dissertation follows Žižek, since this gap's occlusion reduces users to a closed universe, *Matrix*-like environment of paranoia.

Nevertheless, this dissertation does not follow Žižek in terms of his elevation of one version of the Other over the other, seeking as he does "*to re-establish alienation in the [symbolic] big Other as constitutive of subjectivity*" (367). Žižek's position endorses determination in the last instance by the signifier over the digital screen, rather than an analysis of how the two are currently entangled together. Accordingly, Žižek's position must be examined for its alternate side as well. The subject of Google should be anxious over how much the algorithm sees through the screen, leading to what De Vos calls the "horror towards our own artificiality, our own mechanistic nature, our own *more inhuman than inhuman* condition that resurfaces via the machine" (92). Rather than actively hiding from this gaze, an alternate path for the subject is to expose oneself fully to the digital gaze, placing oneself in a passive position. This exposure follows what Krips outlines as the tactic of overconformity that counters systems which thrive on small acts of resistance from their subjects. As Krips explains through Žižek, "new political possibilities… for opposing modern regimes of surveillance" involve acts of "overconformity" in which the logic of the system is followed "to the letter, even when ideological 'common sense' suggests otherwise" (98-9). This overconformity involves "actively endorsing the passive confrontation with the *objet a*" as traumatic gaze, "bypassing the intermediate role of the screen of fantasy" (Žižek qtd. in Krips 99). In so doing, the subject appears not as a blind spot of surveillance capitalism, but as the unassimilable surplus of object *a*, an excremental by-product to subjectification. As De Vos argues, "the *objet a* stands for the very failure, the remainder of the subjectivation process" which cannot "be fed into the computation" (212), to both the disappointment of surveillance capitalism and the user who wants to outsource their desire to Google. With this tactic of overconformity in mind, it is time to turn to the cultural objects analyzed in this dissertation, which either represent or demonstrate overconformity with digital search, along with the surplus of failure that emerges at its limits.

Chapter Summary

One of the primary social issues confronted in this dissertation involves the conjoining of the subject's search to immediate findings, standardizing desire to the models of digital capitalism. Consequently, Chapter 1 argues for the importance of splitting the social alignment of searching and finding, as a means of changing the subject. The chapter turns to Pablo Picasso's statement of "I do not search, I find" as a definition of the aesthetic act, along with Lacan's adaptation of Picasso's statement as a definition of the analytic act. Picasso's statement orientates itself toward finding what is not sought, a model which Lacan initially endorses in the analytic setting. Later, Lacan revises, saying "I do not find, I search," in which he stresses searching for what cannot be found. With his revision, Lacan emphasizes not so much positioning oneself on the side of finding or searching, but rather the necessary counterposing of these two actions when it comes to a genuine act, one that allows a movement of the subject out of social determination. The chapter applies the lessons of Lacan's revision of Picasso's statement to two autofiction novels, Megan Boyle's *Liveblog* (2013; 2018) and Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013). Both are set within digital capitalism where the protagonists' searches are met with instantaneous findings. Ultimately, the novels locate a split between the search of their protagonists, and the search results of the internet, a gap which their protagonists begin to gravitate around. Both protagonists find something that they were not searching for, which enables them to then search for something that cannot be found, in the process breaking free from the mode of searching ingrained by digital capitalism.

While Chapter 1 mainly addresses the individual's subjection to search, Chapter 2 addresses the interpersonal encounters that take place when users search for each other, through a reading of two novels, *You* (2014) by Caroline Kepnes and *Sympathy* (2017) by Olivia Sudjic. Granted unparalleled access to the other through Google, the cyberstalking protagonists of both novels become obsessed with the other rendered as search results. In the process, they illuminate a central tension of this dissertation, between the act of digital searching and the digital screen, between depth and surface. The protagonists' search for the other moves *into* the screen, as they continually pull back veils of content to only reveal more content behind them. Their movement into the other through Google is balanced by the immobile digital screen, which remains a

resolute barrier between the search and the object searched for. The depths of search are contradicted by the flatness of the digital screen; the hermeneutic quest for the other's true self is counterposed to an erotic of the digital surface. Gradually, searching for the other switches into doomscrolling the other, a behavior which this chapter connects more broadly to social changes under digital capitalism related to love and gender. In both novels, the persistent mediation of the other through the search result only renders the eventual encounter with the alterity of the other more traumatic. Both novels illustrate an impossibility waiting at the limits of the subject's search for the other.

While the previous chapters engage characters pursuing a spectral object of desire within the depths of the internet, Chapter 3 shows characters attempting to bury a spectral object—the ghost of the dead—within the internet, with the help of Google and other social media platforms. *Unfriended* (Gabriadze 2014), *Personal Shopper* (Assayas 2016) and *Searching* (Chaganty 2018) investigate the digital interface's mediation of the spectral weight of the dead upon the minds of the living. In *Unfriended*, the main character attempts to memorialize the Facebook profile of a friend for whose death she was responsible, thereby removing her from public search results and enclosing her ghost within the internet. *Personal Shopper* features a main character whose twin brother has recently passed away, and who attempts to search for him through the digital screen, a search which only enchains her to the spectral logic of the commodity-form which the digital screen vitalizes. *Searching*'s main character deals with the loss of a loved one with the digital screen as well, first his wife, and then potentially his daughter. Like the main character of *Unfriended*, he conceals digital traces of his wife from his computer's search results, but then in a reverse motion, he attempts to find his missing daughter from all that's left of her: search results. In this way, the search result of *Searching* is both living and dead. The ghosts that appear in each of the films are read through Jacques Derrida's theory of the specter, marking a return of that which was repressed by the digital screen. Linking the films to broader social issues, the chapter contends that the knowledge of death is that which is most in need of mediation in the digital age, due to how it signals an untraversable limit, countering the illusion of digital abundance. As exhibited in these films, the internet's specific techniques of distancing the user from this knowledge articulate its mode of mediation in its most intense state.

Chapter 4 analyzes how the stability of settler colonial society depends on screening off Indigeneity, a repression which engenders a relentless searching for

Indigeneity in the subject of settler colonialism, a search that continues digitally today. Behind the cultural production of this screen, there emerges the anxiety of the gaze for the settler subject. Paradoxically, settlers exist in a state of both anxiety about encountering this gaze, as well as fantasizing about this gaze as an object of desire, since becoming reconciled with this lost object would calm anxiety over the viability of their community. In *The Searchers* (Ford 1956), Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) embodies this screen, visually safeguarding the violence of settler colonialism from the settler community, while simultaneously searching for a girl kidnapped and raised by an Indigenous tribe. She becomes the enigmatic object of either a search and destroy mission or a search and rescue mission, depending on the settler community and Ethan's moods. The chapter moves onto the remake, *Maliglutit* (Kunuk & Ungalaaq 2016), which illuminates the impossibility of the search at the heart of the original. Rather than concluding with a reconciliation like *The Searchers* between the search and its object, *Maliglutit* widens the gap between what is searched for, and what is ultimately found. The final cultural object of the chapter, Abel's *Injun* demonstrates an impossible search for a primary document of Indigeneity within the confines of settler colonialism. The mode of encounter with Indigeneity involves the poet searching for the titular slur across 91 digitized western novels, returning many pages of search results. Like *Maliglutit*, *Injun* works to separate what is searched for and what is found, gesturing to a gap unable to be reconciled. Abel writes poetry around this gap, twisting, cutting, joining, and knotting the search results into unrecognizable and sublime forms, transfigured by the drive of his search.

In compelling ways, each of these works demonstrate how search interacts with subjectivity. The cultural objects of this dissertation work through rather than around the collective fantasy of the search engine, whether that it is at the level of the individual, the interpersonal, the spectral, or the political. They do not point backward to some ideal of subjectivity forever distorted by the search engine, but rather produce new forms of subjectivity out of the lack that they find in the search engine's results. The subject emerges as the failure of its search result.

Chapter 1

Searching for the Subject: The Alternative Search Engines of *Liveblog* and *Taipei*

Picasso once said: “I do not seek, I find.” Does this saying not apply to the internet user, who rather than having to search, increasingly receives personally curated results? A prime example, TikTok immerses users in a stream of algorithmically found content, in which viewers simply swipe to navigate, as opposed to searching the platform. Similarly, YouTube features an endless sequence of recommended content that auto-plays. Google seems to be on the side of search but is driven by the reduction of search time along with the amplification of what is found in quantity, making it more of a finding engine. On YouTube videos which have fallen afoul of the algorithm, the viral comments below index a rarity of genuine searching on the internet, as an activity to be confessed:

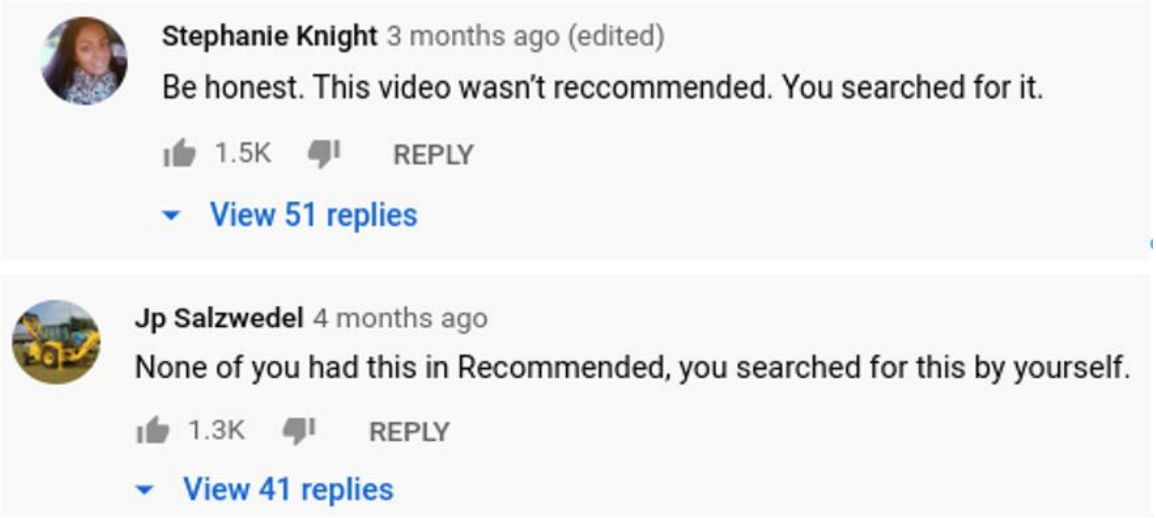

Figure 2: YouTube screengrabs

Yet to argue that the internet user, like Picasso, is on the side of finding moves against the flow of the doomscroll, the user’s endless search through the results for some quilting point, some ultimate finding never to be found. It is more accurate to argue that the internet instead positions the user’s searching and finding in an unprecedented relation of immediacy, in which to search means to immediately find. The closer searching becomes to finding, the less there is searching or finding as distinct actions,

since both require the search to be separated from what it wants to find. Along these lines, Shoshana Zuboff maligns how "'search' [once] meant a daring existential journey, not a finger tap to already existing answers" (990). Yet, searching and finding have always been socially fused to some degree, constituting the environment that such daring existential journeys must depart from. In fact, the alignment of searching and finding into a single function appears in the etymology of "to find," which traces back to the Latin *petere*, meaning "to search, to seek" ("find, *v.*"). Rather than looking back into the past for a pure searching uncontaminated by the finding of already composed answers, this chapter focuses instead on the historically specific alignment of searching and finding established by Google, as well as aesthetic acts that separate searching from search results. The chapter argues that it is only in the splitting of searching from finding that the user of digital capitalism can change as a subject, freeing them from a social alignment of searching and finding whose standardization of the subject is more widespread today through the extensive usage of search engines. As stated in this dissertation's introduction, if the subject is a search, then it is only by modifying their mode of searching that they can change, a change necessary to effectively resist digital capitalism, combatting it at the level of the subject position it generates.

To investigate the relation between searching and finding, this chapter examines Lacan's working-through of his one-time analysand Picasso's pithy phrase at multiple key points across two decades of his seminars. In its original context, Picasso's remark refused to satisfy the demands of his academically inclined audience, who wished to be enlightened as to his artistic process. Elaborating upon his remark, Picasso states: "when I paint, my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for," thereby elevating "the joy of discovery, the pleasure of the unexpected" (270-1). As Marguerite Charreau elucidates, Picasso's remark situates searching on the side of "thought, reflection, the fabrication of theoretical knowledge, while finding would be on the side of painting, and therefore of the act" (94; my translation). The significance of Picasso's statement involves the gap it maintains between searching and finding when defining the aesthetic act. Shifting from painting to writing, this chapter turns to two autofiction novels as separations of searching from finding within a digital setting, Megan Boyle's *Liveblog* (2013; 2018) and Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013). Despite the internet's expansive vistas of search, the two novels document their protagonists' failures to find what they are searching for through the internet—and more generally, digital

capitalism—a failure that represents the key finding of the two novels. The novels demonstrate the elusive limit that both protagonists find in their digital searches, a limit whose negativity necessitates the subject shift into a new mode of searching, becoming a different subject. Rather than searching leading to finding—the logic of the internet—finding leads to searching.

Before turning to the novels, this chapter opens with an extended exploration of Lacan's development of Picasso's statement. For both Lacan and Picasso, separating searching from finding is crucial to the definition of both the aesthetic and the analytic act, both of which leave a new subject in their wake. Lacan first quotes Picasso's "truly sovereign formulation" (*Seminar VI* 123) in his sixth seminar, taking place from 1958-9. He deploys Picasso's formulation while discussing Sigmund Freud's identification of the unconscious core to beating fantasies in his essay "A Child is Being Beaten," involving the subject themselves being beaten. Why does the subject fantasize about this? Lacan answers that "the precise moment at which the subject gets closest to realizing himself as a subject in the signifying dialectic" involves "primary masochism," in which the subject perceives their "whole being… resid[ing] in the very possibility of subjective cancellation" (123). Lacan contends that it is only in approaching the limit of "being abolished" that the subject "weighs the dimension in which he subsists as a being who is subject to will, a being who can formulate a wish" (123). It is through the reduction of the subject's autonomy that they can (unconsciously) fantasize about their autonomy, a mental habit that Lacan describes as neuroticism. Referencing Picasso's statement, Lacan suggests that "the neurotic subject is like Picasso" in both being the "type that finds" (123) as opposed to searching. By insinuation, he also suggests that Picasso is neurotic. Picasso's finding is aligned with the passivity of masochism—his artistic technique might be described as "a painter is being painted"—rather than being aligned with the agency of searching. It is through the reduction of agency that Picasso fantasizes about creative agency.

This discussion relates back to the chapter's opening contention that the dominant mode of engaging with the internet involves a masochistic finding, a submission to the algorithm's probing into subjectivity: "a subject is being searched" rather than "a subject searches the internet." While Picasso submits to the desires of the paintbrush, users submit to the desires of the search engines that drive digital capitalism. Through letting their subjectivity be afflicted by the algorithms of search

engines, users fantasize unconsciously about their agency, how at any point they could step away from the computer, deleting their desire. Todd McGowan writes how "subjectivity has a fundamentally masochistic form, and it continually repeats the masochistic act that founds it" (*Enjoying What We Don't Have* 28) involving the submission to (the Other's) desire. Now more than ever this submission becomes bodily, in that users submit to the search results displayed on a screen, toward which their entire body turns like a sunflower. They become a screen-flower, dependent. Digital masochism represents a key issue of this dissertation and will be returned to as a topic in this chapter and the next.

Though Lacan's first citation brings the masochistic/neurotic subject and Picasso together, the next citation distinctly separates the two, occurring in his subsequent seventh seminar, taking place from 1959-60. Lacan references the "celebrated expression of Picasso" (*Seminar VII* 118) while riffing on Freud's remark in *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that the "finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it" (264). In a commentary on Freud's three essays, Philippe van Haute and Herman Westerink explain that this re-finding involves "breast-sucking [as] the model for all later object relations" (69) in which every sexual object sought by the subject amounts to an attempt to relocate the breast.[7] The unconscious remembers the warm milk from the mother's breast as a form of objectless, autoerotic pleasure granting a sense of wholeness. As van Haute and Westerink elaborate, "the breast can now acquire a meaning that it could not have had before" (69), becoming, retroactively, an object promising the same pleasure, but unable to deliver. This bliss is imagined as lost upon entrance into puberty and "adult object-related sexuality" (van Haute & Westerink 69). Sexual pleasure now appears at a remove from the subject, whether by social regulation or the unwillingness of partners. In this transition from an autoerotic satisfaction to satisfaction being regulated in an object external to the subject, sexuality becomes fantasmatic, leading to the "creation of neurotic symptoms" (van Haute & Westerink 70).

[7] It should be clarified that for Lacan the breast becomes only one among various representatives or figures of the lost object, rather than having any mythical centrality for all subjects. As he ambivalently states in his eleventh seminar, the breast "certainly represents that part of himself that the individual loses at birth, and which may serve to symbolize the most profound lost object" though "I could make the same kind of reference for all the other objects" (*Seminar XI* 198).

Object-related sexuality appears mysterious or repulsive, in comparison to the simple satisfaction fantasized of in the infant stage.

Early into Lacan's seventh seminar, he speaks on a similar topic involving the subject's "search for an archaic—one might almost say a regressive—quality of indefinable pleasure which animates unconscious instinct as a whole" (42), directing the subject toward the "recognition and, as Freud explained later… recovery of the object" (33). The repressed truth is that this pleasure never existed, which cannot be acknowledged for it would annihilate the subject's search, a search that directs the subject out into the world. A compromise forms in the psyche in which "the pleasure principle governs the search for the object and imposes the detours which maintain the distance in relation to its end," guiding the subject through signifiers into "a series of satisfactions that are tied to the relation to the object and are polarized by it" (*VII* 58). With this compromise, there can be no true finding as the "function of the pleasure principle is to make man always search for what he has to find again, but which he never will attain" (*VII* 68). It is only in re-finding the object that the subject loses it, *ad infinitum*. Neither can there be true searching, in which the searcher is separated from what is sought, since the search of the pleasure principle is led by the nose by the object, following what "for Freud [is] the fundamental definition of the object in its guiding function" (*VII* 118). The pleasure principle collapses the subject's searching and finding into a circuit, structured by the illusory object.

Within this discussion, Lacan employs Picasso's quote to distinguish a mode of finding "that takes precedence over the seeking," thereby moving "beyond the pleasure principle" (118-9). The pleasure principle involves the subject being lured "from signifier to signifier" as part of a "search which leads it to find things in signs" (*VII* 119). By contrast, Picasso's finding represents the result of "an antipsychic search" (*VII* 118). Rather than pursuing the thing in the sign—the impossible signified—what is pursued is the "beyond-of-the-signified" (*VII* 54), a void located behind the signifier. Juxtaposing Picasso's quote to a discussion of pottery, Lacan argues that "the potter… creates the vase with his hand around the emptiness" (121), thereby signalling the void behind the signifier, as opposed to the mythical substance posited by the pleasure principle. Like Picasso's aim toward a finding divorced from any research paradigm, Lacan elevates the potter's act of creation as being "*ex nihilo*" (121). Like the potter, Picasso's mode of *trouver* (finding) finds not another substitution object to plug *le trou* (the hole), but

sublimates *le trou*, the hole that cannot be filled with found objects, for it founds the subject.

By contrast, search engines serve the pleasure principle, being geared toward finding substitution objects curated for their user, resembling Lacan's description of the pleasure principle as "sift[ing], siev[ing], in such a way that reality is only perceived by man, in his natural, spontaneous state at least, as radically selected" (47). In the digital era, this radical selection is outsourced to platforms to be algorithmically refined, leading to the "internet bubble" phenomenon. It is not simple information that the search engine promises, but rather something approaching the objects of the pleasure principle, meaning, comfort, and satisfaction. As discussed in this dissertation's introduction, Ganaele Langlois speaks to Google's transition from the field of "knowledge and information" toward the "the psychic level of desire and satisfaction" (85) through reference to the "Parisian Love" commercial. To look at a similar example, a 2017 AXE body spray commercial called "is it ok for guys…" shows a search box in which men type in various questions they have about the validity of their masculinity. In the commercial, text appears on the screen indicating that "these are the real questions guys are searching every day."

Figure 3: Still from "is it ok for guys..." (0:42)

Though AXE's intentions are admirable in confronting toxic masculinity (while selling a body spray that might be toxic), their commercial patches up the signifier of masculinity—masculinity is OK—to protect its signified, rather than sublimating the void

behind this signifier. As Lacan states, “man is nothing but a signifier” (*Seminar XX* 33). The better question to search would be: is it OK for guys to be a signifier? For the users in the commercial, Google responds to a troubling or anxiety-provoking hole in their knowledge or experience, expressed in the form of a query. Lacan etymologically connects query to “*circa*, detour” (*Seminar VII* 58), meaning that the subject will often pose queries to the Other, in its everyday form of the subject supposed to know (occupied today by Google) to repress the fearful truth that the answer must ultimately come from the subject themselves, without support from the Other.

Lacan again quotes Picasso’s remark while opening his eleventh and perhaps most significant seminar taking place in 1964, following his excommunication from the International Psychoanalytic Association. Amid addressing the opening question of “*whether psychoanalysis is a science*” (*Seminar XI* 7), Lacan distances himself from searching, framed as research: “I am a bit suspicious of this term research… I have never regarded myself as a researcher. As Picasso once said, to the shocked surprise of those around him—*I do not seek, I find*” (7). Like Picasso following the paintbrush into unsought discoveries, Lacan follows the speech of his analysands into unsought discoveries. Continuing his critique of research, Lacan points to there being “some affinity between the research that seeks and the religious register” (7). For Lacan, both are linked by the phrase “*you would not seek me if you had not already found me*” in which “the *already found* is already behind, but stricken by something like oblivion” so “is it not… a complaisant search that is then opened up?” (7). Lacan maligns research in fear of true finding, for the find might destroy the prospect of further research. This “already found” specifically suggests the unconscious, as Lacan later details how “Freud’s desire was able to find the entrance into the field of experience he designates as the unconscious,” by slipping a key into the “door” (12) of his patients’ speech. Lacan states that psychoanalysis must continue to find rather than constitute research of Freud: “it is absolutely essential that we should go back to this origin” of Freudian discovery “if we wish to put analysis on its feet” (12). Researching the unconscious leads to its disappearance, establishing a theory through which the subject can stabilize themselves, rather than a praxis that destabilizes the subject.

In the greater context of Lacan’s seminar, originally given the title *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, Freud’s finding takes on valences of founding, in that psychoanalysis was founded on the discovery of the unconscious. To return to the

seminar's opening question, psychoanalysis is a science whose foundation, the unconscious, needs to be perpetually found again, for it is always "sliding-away" (10). Due to this conceptual volatility, it cannot be researched, as this research is perpetually "threatened with being trampled underfoot by him who finds" (8). As Lacan clarifies later into the seminar, "when I said, at the beginning of these talks—I do not seek, I find, I meant that, in Freud's field, one has only to bend down and pick up what is to be found," which bears upon "the real implication of the *nachträglich*" (216). With the perpetual retroactivity of its mode of discovery, the unconscious always disintegrates the logic of the search that led to its detection.

Falling under the shadow of Lacan's critique, is Google not the predominant researcher of the unconscious today? Rather than Google only asking what users want, it also focuses on uncovering the unconscious wishes of its users, as represented by their movements across the internet, to match them with advertising content. As Alexis Wolfe writes, "digital fields seduce the unconscious" (80), spelling out the user's desire through a treasure trove of accessible identities, images, interlocutors, and fantasies. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek describes how the computer's "interface screen functions like a psychoanalyst: the suspension of the symbolic rules which regulate my RL activity enables me to stage-externalize my repressed content which I am otherwise unable to confront" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 178). If Lacan contends that "the unconscious is addressed to the analyst" (Burnham 14), then today digital platforms like Google assume the position of the analyst. There are similarities between the interpretive modes of Google and psychoanalysis. Boris Groys likens Freudian interpretation to that of Google, in that both involve "individual words function[ing]… almost as Internet links: they liberate themselves from their grammatical positions and begin to function as connections to other, subconscious contexts" (13). Like Freud, Google interprets the unconscious logic of the subject's desire.

From a certain perspective, Google's interpretation of the user's unconscious is quite successful. Byung-Chul Han deplores how surveillance platforms like Google "can even read desires we do not know we harbour" with its "access to the realm of our unconscious actions and inclinations" (*Psychopolitics* 63-4). In a similar vein, Clint Burnham contends that: "the Internet knows us, and knows what we know and even knows what we don't know we know… our unconscious" (20). To be clear, it is not that Google knows what we desire, but rather knows the structure of our desire, how it is

always an interpretation of the desire of the Other. As Todd McGowan writes, “we desire what we assume the Other desires because the Other desires it and because we want to attract the desire of the Other” and thus “the subject will search for—and never find—the [object] that perfectly embodies… the desire of the Other” (*Capitalism and Desire* 35). Leading to its success, Google’s algorithm learns this structure of desire, prompting the user’s endless return to its interface to conduct inquiries into desire. Why does the algorithm think I want that? Do I want that? Do others want that? The algorithm does not learn about subjectivity directly, for there is nothing to learn; it rather learns how to fill the role of the Other for the subject.

Unconscious desire is not something inside the subject that the internet expropriates, but rather emerges as a by-product of the subject’s interactions with the Other. With Google appearing as the Other by assuming the role of the subject supposed to know, the unconscious is positioned between the user and the algorithms of search engines, belonging to neither one nor the other. What is the result of Google’s research into the user? Sam Kriss suggests that by observing “the chaos of everyone’s life in ten trillion consumer decisions,” the conclusion is that “none of it adds up” beyond there being “some tiny chaotic imp burrowing around in the innermost folds of your brain, doing stuff for no reason” (n.p.). While Kriss posits some devilish psychic interiority befuddling Google, the truth of the unconscious is that it is extimate, being located as Lacan states “between the subject and the Other, their cut in action” (*Écrits* 712). Is the tiny chaotic imp inside the brain then Google’s algorithm, or are we the tiny chaotic imp inside the code? The structure of extimacy implies that the answer is both.

Despite their similarities, Groys differentiates between the unconscious addressed to the psychoanalyst and the unconscious addressed to Google. In the latter, “man ceases to speak in the traditional sense of the word… instead, he or she lets words appear or disappear in different contexts—in a completely silent, purely operational, extra- or meta-linguistic mode of practice” (11). With Google Home, users do speak, but they do so in a manner that is still operational and meta-linguistic, driven toward an efficiency of speech rather than the inefficiencies of speech that psychoanalysis targets. As to what exactly changes here, a fourth citation of Picasso’s remark by Lacan in his nineteenth seminar (1971-2) is instructive. Lacan quotes the remark while arguing for the centrality of speech to the detection of the unconscious, reiterating how “the key point, the nodal point [of] *lalangue* and in the field of *lalangue* [is]

the operation of speech" (*Seminar XIX* 38). What is *lalangue*? Dylan Evans defines Lacan's concept as covering "non-communicative aspects of language which, by playing on ambiguity and homophony" place the analytic relationship on the path of the asignifying truth of the unconscious, with everyday language representing an "ordered superstructure sitting on top of this substrate" (100).

An example from the documentary film *Rendez-vous chez Lacan* (Miller 2011) illuminates matters, featuring Lacan's former analysand Suzanne Hommel speaking of an analytic encounter. Having finished recounting a dream to Lacan, she informs him that she wakes up at 5am every morning, and that 5am was the time that the Gestapo came to get the Jews in their homes when she was a young girl. Lacan leaps from his chair, approaches Hommel, and gives her an "extremely gentle caress" on her cheek. Hommel interprets Lacan's act as *geste à peau*, establishing a homophony of Gestapo. It is doubtful whether any amount of psychological research could lead to this analytic encounter founded on a certain senselessness. Lacan and Hommel together happen upon a key into the unconscious through this intervention into the materiality of the master-signifier Gestapo when it appeared in the exchange of speech. Speaking of the effects of this intervention, Hommel explains how the "surprise" of Lacan's act and her retroactive interpretation of it, "didn't diminish the pain, but it made it something else." Rather than Lacan changing her conscious thoughts, something shifted in Rommel's unconscious. No matter how many interpretations Google produces of the unconscious, could it produce one with this ethical resonance? Could it touch the unconscious as gently as Lacan does in this moment? One is reminded of Lacan's statement that while researchers of the unconscious are "busying themselves, by psychologizing analytic theory, in stitching up [its] gap," he himself "never re-open[s] it without great care" (*Seminar XI* 23). Lacan does not pick apart his analysands in his search for the unconscious inside them, but rather finds it differently each time in the singular speech of his analysands. While Lacan performs an intervention into the subject's unconscious, reconfiguring the nature of the object that they are searching for (stripping it of meaning or signification), Google aims to keep the subject tethered to an unconscious enjoyment, bound to the search for an impossible object that appears just beyond the next page of search results.

Jan De Vos touches on this difference when he writes how "digitality trades collective education" about the unconscious "for collective nudging, insofar as the

instinctual urges and unconscious drives are not explained to the masses, but instead are directly used to steer them" (163). While Freud worried that psychoanalysis could fall into an interminable interpretation of the unconscious, Google has no issue with interminable interpretation due to rising advertising profits, facilitating the user's free association of commodities. Rather than subjecting the user to an endless series of substitutions that allow "the subject [to] remain trapped in his circumlocutions" as Will Greenshields puts it, the goal of psychoanalysis involves instead "a reduction of signification" attempting to isolate this hole which "anchors the subject's particular 'economy of *jouissance*'" (111). Psychoanalysis finds the hole, so that the subject can reorganize themselves around it. Meanwhile, Google plugs this hole with millions of search results, promising subjects a jouissance anchored in the unfathomable depths of the internet, extended by Google rather than reduced. Society becomes unable to change due to the stasis of its subjects who are caught in the gravitational pull of a libidinal blackhole.

Altogether, Lacan returns again and again to Picasso's remark at significant moments of his seminars (but curiously, never in his *Écrits*). In this function, Picasso's remark seems like one of Lacan's most important mottos, favouring the act of finding over the process of searching. But in Lacan's twenty-third seminar (1975-6), almost two decades after his first citation of Picasso, he changes his position: "there was a time when I used to sound my bugle a bit more. Like Picasso, I used to say—*I don't seek, I find*. These days, you might as well say: *I don't find, I seek*" (*Seminar XXIII* 74, 214). While the first citation of Picasso's statement finds Lacan in the aftermath of having confidently presented his intricate Graph of Desire, the revision finds him "hoping that the [seminar] room wouldn't be so full" since he "was hoping to speak more confidentially" (*XXIII* 74). Going on, Lacan laments how "it would be nice if [he] could manage to get some response, some collaboration, some active interest… in what is becoming a research project," one where he is "starting to do what the word *research* implies, namely to go round in circles" (74). In the context of the seminar, Lacan is struggling with the topology of the Borromean knot, often ending up "in a pickle" (123) and needing the aid of mathematicians in his audience to help him along. It is from Lacan's audience that the reversal of Picasso's statement originates, as Jacques Alain-Miller states in his seminar commentary: "I am the author of the rather uncharitable (private) remark" ("A Note Threaded Stitch by Stitch" 214), repeated publicly by Lacan.

For Miller, reversing Picasso's "superb statement" amounts to a critique of Lacan's seminar, in terms of how "all the help in the world could never silence the tolling bell of the 'hopelessness' that resounds throughout of the 'method' of the knots" (214). Yet, Lacan enjoys the reversal, repeating it in his twenty-fifth seminar in a more positive manner, while still addressing the Borromean knot: "currently I do not find, I search… and some people even want to accompany me in this research" (55). Paradoxically, Lacan finds something in Miller's critique that Lacan no longer found.

More so than Miller, Élisabeth Roudinesco perceives Lacan's switch from finding to searching to be symptomatic of a decline. For Roudinesco, the late Lacan's seminars conducted on "planet Borromeo" amount to a vainglorious "search for the absolute," in which "he undoes what he built by knitting his knots and his pieces of string" (qtd. in Greenshields 9, 14). Offering a different view, Greenshields argues that the dominance of topology (particularly that of the Borromean knot) in Lacan's later seminars amounts not to the abandoning of the psychoanalytic project, but rather a rigorous fidelity to the eternal novelty of its enigmatic object, the unconscious. This fidelity assumes the form of searching rather than finding, as the difficulty of the unconscious as concept, its perpetual sliding-away, demonstrates itself further to Lacan. Responsibility to the unconscious does not consist solely of moments of analytic discovery, but also repeated missteps and missed appointments. Following the unconscious necessarily involves a certain failure, in that the "*supporting point*, the *navel*" of the unconscious, "as Freud would say… vanishes beneath sense" (Lacan qtd. in Greenshields 30). Greenshields maintains that Lacan's fascination with the topology of the Borromean knots, "rather than legitimising a manic free play of interpretation, actually helps to concentrate praxis toward what has *effects* beyond the hopeless liberty or bad infinity of the Sisyphean search for meaning" (31). Analytic praxis aims at a vanishing goal, which allows it to stay on the path of the "point at infinity" (Lacan qtd. in Greenshields 25) at which the subject is founded in language, in the Other. Putting it similarly, Samuel Weber writes that the concept of the unconscious for Lacan represents the "vehicle of a *search*" (10) that is "forged on the trace of what works to constitute the subject" (Lacan qtd. in Weber 10). The search for the subject requires a concept of the unconscious.

The switch from finding to searching can be further elucidated by Lacan's shifting attitude toward research. In his fourteenth seminar (1966-7), Lacan begins to reconsider his earlier dismissal: "research [*recherché*] [is] nothing other than what we can ground as

being the *radical origin* of Freud's approach concerning his object, nothing else can give it to us than what appears to be the *irreducible starting point* of the Freudian *novelty*, namely, *repetition*" (qtd. in Greenshields 110). Through compelling the patient to speak again and again, Freud's concept of the unconscious endeavours toward the repetition that lies beyond the pleasure principle, the death drive as the origin of life itself, whose repetition enacts what Aaron Schuster describes as a "primitive synthesis… sustain[ing] a psychic continuum by collecting together disparate and scattered excitations and giving to them a more or less stable rhythm" (51). The unconscious represses this meaningless repetition through whatever screens it can manage, and so it is through rigorously searching the unconscious that the effects of the drive become observable if not perfectly transmissible. For Lacan, this search is not that of "the *hermeneutic demand*, which is precisely that which seeks… the ever new and the never exhausted signification" (*Seminar XI* 7-8), but rather a search for the hole of non-meaning, to designate "the hole… the object *a*, which Lacan says 'is in fact only the presence of a hollow, a void that can be occupied by any object'" (Charreau 98). One cannot find this hole, for it is what founds the subject. To find it would be to found another subject, for whom the find becomes meaningless in being constituted by the search of a different subject.

This paradox constitutes the very aim of psychoanalysis, involving the changing of the subject. At times an analysand before his audience, Lacan's shift from one who finds to one who searches represents the method, the traversing of a split, rather than the reconciliation of the split. To clarify, Lacan's change here is not one of historical maturation, in which searching suddenly becomes more significant than finding. Lacan's repositioning of himself within Picasso's statement still maintains what is most essential about the original quote: the gap between finding and searching. Lacan's revision only transforms opposition into contradiction, by ultimately situating himself on both sides of the statement. While Google aims toward the efficient alignment of searching and finding until they coalesce into each other, Lacan illuminates the impossibility of their alignment.

Marguerite Charreau writes that Lacan's reformulation of Picasso's quote enacts "a connection or a mode of relation" between searching and finding, in which one is chosen only at the cost of the other, producing a necessary loss which can only "be recognized as remainder" (96; my translation). For Charreau, this remainder constitutes the subject themselves: "the mismatch between what is found and what is sought, this

game, this space between the two, this sliding clearly shows the fault and the division of the subject" (100). Though Lacan's shift from finding to searching is not a historical progression, Charreau contends that the order in which Lacan moved from one to the other is still crucial, recalling the significance of sequencing in Lacan's development of the four discourses. For psychoanalysis, finding precedes searching, in that "the found… escapes the very moment it is found and has a revival effect: it is in fact what makes it possible to mark the edge of the hole around which one makes the turn" (Charreau 99). It is only Lacan's initial finding that renders his later "research worthy of this name, the one that allowed him to go around in circles, or to make mistakes with Borromean knots" (Charreau 99). The subject cannot skip ahead to the drive of search, "touring the hole… as the mode of satisfaction favoured by psychoanalysis" (Charreau 98-9), without first being duped by the structure of the find, "of desire, of the unconscious, of the signifier, in other words, to be fooled by repetition" (Charreau 101). Christ spoke to his disciples (as Google might say to its users): "seek, and you will find" (Luke qtd. in Charreau 94). Lacan's response: find, and you will seek.

What does this lengthy digression into Lacan contribute to an analysis of Google? The specific relation (or more accurately, non-relation) into which Lacan places the dyad of searching and finding is significant in an era of search engines, which bind searching to finding. It is only in splitting the search result that the subject can depart from the chrysalis of the user. What Lacan's working-through of Picasso's statement demonstrates is that the find must precede the search, meaning that it is only through the outlining of the void behind the search result that another mode of search can begin. This chapter now turns to Boyle and Lin's autofiction novels as examples of this splitting of searching and finding in a digital environment. Rather than being non-dupes of the digital, Boyle and Lin are digital dupes *par excellence*, both competing "to eventually have the most information about a person possible on the internet" (*Liveblog* 526), whether through hours of recorded video of themselves, multiple social media accounts (often on the same platform), or blogs dating back to the primeval internet. The protagonists at first search for something behind the screen of the search result, only to later engage the void behind this screen.

It is through an adherence to the internet as a social structure of finding, of desire, of the unconscious, of the signifier, that both Boyle and Lin, as the protagonists of their novels, brush against the limit of the internet. Finding this limit is important today

when the internet appears as a fantasy of limitless abundance, due to the infrastructure provided by search engines like Google. For both Boyle and Lin, it is a finding that gives way to a new mode of searching. Though much has been made about the internet's supplanting of the novel as a dominant means of representation, these two authors employ the novel in the style described by Georg Lukács, in which a "fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivized as the psychology of the novel's heroes: they are seekers" in which "seeking implies that neither the goals nor the way leading to them can be directly given" (60). Boyle and Lin's novels are search engines that compete with Google in defining what it means to search today, along with what it means to be a subject.

The Limit of the Vanity Search

Tom Vanderbilt notes that "we once used search engines to look for information" but "now we use search to find *us*—what once seemed transactional now seems an extension of ourselves" (qtd. in Balick 28). Inspecting his browsing history, poet Kenneth Goldsmith notes surprise over "how many times over the course of a week [he] self-googled," suspecting his unconscious (96). According to a 2017 study of internet habits, 10% of Gen Z and millennial internet users stated that they googled themselves every day, while nearly half of all users admitted to googling themselves frequently (Hill n.p.). The logic of the vanity search can be explained through this viral meme:

Figure 4: Screengrab of Butterflies_Books Reddit post

The subject imagines themselves both as the producer of the self-image (the seen), and the receiver (the seer). The computer's screen here embodies the function of the signifier itself, whose "origin" according to Lacan" involves "the aim that the Other, the real Other, should not know" (*Seminar X* 63) as to the subject's true status. In the meme, the subject crafts themselves as signifier, then imagines the gaze from the other side of the screen, with the satisfaction that they have deceived the Other, calming anxieties about the desire of the Other. The digital screen offers a useful screening of the Other's gaze, with its one-dimensionality preventing a true encounter with this gaze, which comes "from all sides" (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 72). Being nowhere locatable, it is everywhere. The meme above indexes the internet's gentrification of this Real gaze, in which what Joan Copjec calls the "opaque" (34) material of the signifier dominates the visual field of the internet. Due to this opacity, the more the internet user reveals of themselves through signifiers, the more they can hide; the more they over-share, the more they feel unseen; the closer they become to others online, the less they feel they know them. Ultimately, the internet assumes the "ambiguous and treacherous" nature of a visual field determined by the signifier, "full of traps" (Copjec 34), such as breadcrumbing and catfishing. The vanity search is one such trap, in that it consists of a search dominated by an object—the subject's image or reflection—that must be found again and again, for it is ultimately only a screen (a signifier), concealing an emptiness.

Boyle's *Liveblog* exposes the doomed logic of the vanity search, in which the subject attempts to find the substance of their subjectivity through an externalized representation. Described within the text itself as a "horrific permanent display of 'look at me showing myself to you'" (576), *Liveblog* originally ran from March 17 to September 1 in 2013 as thousands upon thousands of live updates on Boyle's Tumblr. These updates sought to document to the internet "everything [Boyle] [does], think[s], feel[s], and say[s] to the best of [her] ability" (*Liveblog* 5), particularly sharing "things [she] would [not] normally tell people [she] did" (7). The project aims at a repossession of Boyle's sense of self, in that she has "been feeling an… uncontrollable sensation of [her] life not belonging to [her] or something… like it's just this event [she] doesn't seem to be participating in much, and so could be attending by mistake" (5). An edited version of the Tumblr updates was released as a novel in 2018, amounting to a 700-page behemoth of life transcribed: food eaten, drugs taken, bowel movements, dreams, emails, sex, errands, profound moments, mundane moments. Throughout *Liveblog*, Boyle is haunted

by the impossibility of her task, how with every thought externalized, her subjectivity retreats more and more from its representation. As a representative of Boyle, *Liveblog* begins to supersede her, becoming a malevolent doppelgänger. A friend warns her late into things that "liveblog has become a 'big hentai monster' and [she] should stop" (701). Persistently negotiating with the impossibility of self-representation, the project eventually begins to align with what Matthew Flisfeder describes as the logic of drive, consisting of a "subjectivization of that which is beyond representation… the traumatic kernel—the negative limit—of the Self" (77). Having found this limit, Boyle begins to search without hope of finding, transitioning *Liveblog* into a project of drive or repetition.

Boyle spends most of *Liveblog* isolated in either her parents' separate residences, or a new apartment in Rockaway Beach, New York. She interacts with the world primarily through the internet, particularly its search function. Through the course of the novel, Boyle searches for memories: "searched gmail for '3/21/12'" (57); fast food and alcohol: "searched 'wine' on the maps part of my phone" (342); people: "searched 'beth' in [her ex-boyfriend's] facebook friend list" (416); and information: "took a variety of what Google searches confirmed were opiates" (515). This searching is over-proximate to finding, moving away from Lacan's understanding of desire: "the subject… cannot desire without being fundamentally separated from the object" (*Seminar II* 177). The internet's rapid delivery of search results increasingly erodes the obstacle necessary for a more lasting and frustrating search for a virtual object of desire. This alternative search can orientate an individual's sense of self through the inscription of a symbolic goal or wished attainment on a future horizon. Seemingly devoid of desire, Boyle's digital lifestyle leads her to become stuck in the circuits of the pleasure principle, her state resembling what Mark Fisher calls "depressive hedonia" in which the subject can do nothing "else *except* pursue pleasure" with no "appreciation" of a "*beyond* [to] the pleasure principle" (22). Boyle describes her desire as either "passing" (340), unknown (372), false—"ordered pizza around 9PM… didn't want the pizza once i had it" (478)—or non-existent: searching her iTunes, with hundreds of available songs, she "feel[s] deadly 'there is nothing to want at all, about anything' thing" (59). The most problematic suffocation of desire involves Boyle's subjectivity, her desire to change herself, which gradually diminishes in the face of the pleasure of solidifying herself into an externalized representation. Along these lines, she "google[s] [her] name" (637) to see what comes

up, a small act that gestures to the undercurrent of desire within *Liveblog*, that Boyle's digital search for herself will lead to a finding.

Sherry Turkle describes how the internet figures as the latest iteration of humanity's longstanding "search for mirrors" driven by "the question[ing] of who we are" (279). The internet offers a multiplicity of mirrors in which users can search for answers. Jan De Vos contends that "similar processes of individuation" to Lacan's mirror stage repeat themselves in digital environments, where "virtual personas… profess a form of unity and substantiality that we ourselves do not possess" (11). Specific to the writing practice of *Liveblog*, Jodi Dean understands blogging as a means by which "we search for ourselves, trying to know who we are, to pull together our fragmented identities" (123). Fascination with the mirroring affordances of the internet leads the searcher to gravitate around the self as findable object: "lacking answers, we become mesmerized by our own looking, entranced by the reversal of looking for an object to looking at ourselves as objects, to becoming objects ourselves" (Dean 123). Whenever the user feels anxiety about who they are, they can locate themselves within the internet as a shared and seemingly verified object (such as the blue checkmark anointed on select Twitter profiles, confirming their link to the subjects behind them). This action repeats the mirror stage in which "the child searches in the Other (as mirror) for a reflection of itself as a loved object, and this search produces an imaginary identification" (Loose 181). Similarly, Boyle relates in an interview how she initially "imagine[d] [*Liveblog*'s] reader as 'somebody'… not necessarily somebody I'd want to be with romantically, but something like that… some kind of benevolent, loving 'thing' that understood me" (Plummer n.p.). Both somebody and something, this ideal reader becomes more enigmatic as *Liveblog* progresses. Rather than a stable figure of the Other under whose gaze Boyle can reform herself, the digital Other of *Liveblog* is revealed as lacking in its ability to reform Boyle, instead imprisoning her in herself, leaving her feeling as if she were "in an empty room all the time, but the room is [herself] and [she] [doesn't] know how to get out" (512).

Initially, it is Boyle's own look that performs this external gaze, constituting an autoeroticism of the ego, in which Boyle has "a relationship with this liveblog" (14). Boyle's early experience with *Liveblog* is of a satisfying object that she can consume again and again: "going to read liveblog i've written as a reward" (9); "read liveblog from beginning while driving full circle around the Baltimore-Washington beltway" (16); "i've been gleefully re-reading this" (54). Boyle assumes an explicitly autoerotic position

toward her externalization into *Liveblog*, one that she enhances by printing a "115-page liveblog manuscript" which is "satisfying to hold" (59). Eventually, she begins to refer to *Liveblog* as "[her] precious" (240), aping Gollum. Dylan Evans explains how the subject's identification with the mirror image gives rise to the ego formation which is orientated around a certain "imaginary fixity" since it "is in fact an object" (52). Elevation of the imaginary ego-object bears consequences, especially in relation to Boyle's self-improvement goals, since the ego comprises "the source of resistance to psychoanalytic treatment," and more generally, "all subjective growth and change" (Evans 52). Consequently, Boyle's pre-existing bad habits calcify or become worse as *Liveblog* progresses, and the blog metamorphosizes into an object that produces anxiety as much as satisfaction.

Invoking the myth of Narcissus, Lacan argues that the subject's relation to its mirror image, for all its temporary satisfaction and self-love, contains at its core a "suicidal tendency" (*Écrits* 152). As Joan Copjec clarifies, Lacan's version of "narcissism… seeks the self beyond the self-image, with which the subject constantly finds fault and in which it constantly fails to recognize itself," leading to the "malevolence with which the subject regards its image, the aggressivity it unleashes on all its own representations" (37). Despite the seeming stability of digital representations, they are always at risk of being found lacking by the subject and deleted, thereby appearing to delete the subject's lack. Boyle contemplates deleting *Liveblog* frequently. Though she notes early on how she is "honestly enjoy[ing] the company of [herself]" (32), by the end, she is masochistic in relation to the sadistic voice of the project:

> insane dislikable ranter. you don't even update the liveblog regularly, people know they can't count on you. slowly chasing away all people with your insane dislikeable rants about how you're insane and dislikable. counting this. if you write this down, that 'counts' as part of a rant i think, furthering your… the bad thing that you are… (677)

After *Liveblog* terminates in September 2013, Boyle attempts suicide.

Despite being a personal project, *Liveblog* intervenes into the social world, where the internet lures users into the autoerotic circuit of imaginary identifications, promising to block the necessary negotiation with the lack involved in symbolic identifications. To look at an example, Boyle recounts "tweet[ing] that [she] had moved liveblog to blogger," and then thinking "'wait for the goods to roll in, sit back and wait for those tasty retweets,

you motherfucker' and felt pathetic but excited" (182) due to the pleasure promised from this quantified recognition. Yet, this waiting is too passive; Boyle also actively observes her blog's observers through StatCounter, an app designed to track the activity of visitors on her blog. The hard statistics that this app delivers to Boyle—"meekly thought 'no one from mexico is reading anymore' looking at statcounter" (453)—concretize Boyle as a self being viewed or not viewed, being found or not found. De Vos argues that by immersing the user in notifications that they are liked, followed, retweeted, searched for, "the external gaze which structures symbolic identifications (the perspective from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves worthy of love) in digitality is no longer external, but, rather is fully drawn within the framework of the digital itself" (174). There is no gaze of an ambiguous Other to which the subject must address their thoughts and actions, but rather a reified gaze that operates from within the internet enclosing the user in a cocoon of recognition, a satisfying prison. Paraphrasing Žižek, Dean contends that this gaze of an ambiguous Other "is a crucial supposition for the subject's capacity to act" (54), inscribing their actions as meaningful in a symbolic network that extends beyond their comprehension. Dean expands how "absent that gaze, one may feel trapped, passive, or unsure as to the point of doing anything at all" (54), explaining the paralysis enforced upon Boyle by the digital gaze. The internet facilitates an autoeroticism that imprisons the subject within themselves.

What threatens to disappear here is what Žižek calls the "background of radical undecidability" of symbolic identification, in which one has "to rely on the other's word" that one's performance is up to snuff, meaning that "the other remains forever an enigma to me" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 177). The internet attempts to replace the Other's withheld word with a flow of likes and retweets, transporting the self as object into further spheres of digital visibility, enabling viral recognition. Žižek illustrates that "what tends to get lost in virtual communities is this very abyss of the other… in the 'wired universe', the very opaqueness of the other tends to evaporate" (177). Simultaneously, the opaqueness of the subject threatens to evaporate alongside that of the Other. Considering the effects of *Liveblog* on Boyle's readers, she writes "I am more 'a person' to them, but… I don't know if I want them to think I'm a person, seems a little scary in this case" (463). This recognized person does not reside in Boyle, but rather within the internet. At this point, Boyle's search for herself encounters its obverse side, herself as an object findable by others. She worries about people like "the apartment building

people want[ing] to google me" (111), and her mom worries about "potential employers googling [her], and seeing [she's] written about doing drugs, reporting [her] to police" (417). Here, finding takes on additional resonances, as it involves others potentially "find[ing] [her] out" with "troubled judgmental faces" (281).

Yet even this fear of being found out is a fantasy formation, as it reduces the Other's enigma through the positing of a negative reaction. Not having this fantasy fulfilled, Boyle notes a certain disappointment with the ultimate silence of the Other, expressing surprise that "no one has called [her] out on how self-absorbed/obsessed [she is] [and] how [she's] not contributing anything to society" (240). Through over-exposure to the Other, Boyle begins to confront the Other's gaze outlined by Copjec, in which "if you are looking for confirmation of the truth of your being or the clarity of your vision, you are on your own; the gaze of the Other is not confirming; it will not validate you" (36), even if the validation you seek is a negative one. Elaborating, Copjec writes how "the subject, instead of coinciding with or identifying with the gaze, is rather *cut off from it*" (36). Boyle, along with many internet users, turns to the digital screen to negotiate this cut, locating the Other on the other side of the screen. In this way, the internet is not so much a mirror as a screen, a means by which the subject engages not so much with what they can see, as what they cannot see: themselves.

Compared to everyday forms of digital activity, *Liveblog* distinguishes itself by developing a more confrontational stance toward the internet's version of the Other, as Boyle gradually becomes more hysterical in relation to its silence. Patricia Gherovici elucidates how even though "the Other does not exist, one could say that in fact the hysteric invents the other" by repetitively questioning the other as to "what am I?" (58). The internet is full of answers, as users "love being tested and profiled, and [are] gratified with the verdict 'this is what you are'" (De Vos 85) provided by popular online activities like personality quizzes and vanity searches. The answer does not need to be grand, but simply needs to complete the grammatical phrase: "you are… followed," "you are… liked," "you are… searched for," etc., to be unconsciously satisfying. But the hysteric does not accept these answers for they "[reduce] the subject's search to a finite object" while the true "object of the hysteric riddle [is] *object petit a*," and thus "the only true answer to the question is no answer at all—silence" (Gherovici 58-9).

Though *Liveblog* begins with some degree of support from others who interact with the blog, eventually Boyle begins to question more and more the desire of the project's Other: "anyone still reading?" (167); "am I doing something differently than in beginning of liveblog or did people just lose interest via inconsistent updates… troubled by this to annoying degree" (187); "DO PEOPLE READ THIS AND THINK 'LOOK AT THIS FESTERING MOSH PIT PARTY OF ONE" (548); "WHAT DO YOU WANT MOST FROM ME" (685). Rather than receiving answers, Boyle only receives questions as to her own desire with the project: "people keep looking at this and asking me questions" (372). In the face of this silence from the Other, she begins to make various demands for a diagnosis (59), for "someone to read this and tell [her] where [she] lost focus, and of what" (372), for someone to provide "beatings or harshly worded anythings" (644)—a blogger is being beaten—and for someone to illuminate the "crucial error she is missing" (671). Lacan contends that "unconscious desire… is found in the repetition of demand [as] a matter of the search, which is at once necessary and condemned" (*Seminar IX* 213-4), since it attempts the impossible, to silence the silence of the Other. The doom of this search—its simultaneous dependence upon and separation from the Other—is primarily negotiated with today by the user's play with the digital screen, an activity that Boyle overidentifies with to illustrate its traumatic limit.

For Lacan, escaping this doomed search involves the analytic setting, in which "the patient's insistent, repetitive demand for an instantaneous cure gives way to something that moves, that is intrigued with each new manifestation of the unconscious" (Fink 26). Speaking similarly to the cure of psychoanalysis, Todd McGowan writes that "the subject abandons the belief in the possibility of finding a solution to the problem of subjectivity" (*Enjoying What We Don't Have* 23). After the completion of *Liveblog*, Boyle does eventually turn to psychoanalysis ("Liveblog 2020"), but a running theme of *Liveblog* itself involves Boyle's "not wanting to do therapy and not liking it, after having tried therapy and it not seeming to work" (511). In Boyle's rejection of professional therapy in favour of the internet and blogging, she provides evidence for Élisabeth Roudinesco's accusation of "the cult of auto-fiction" along with "the internet and mass communications… making it possible for an author to take herself for the clinician of her own pathology," leading to the "trust reposed in the representative of the care institution [having] vanished" (44-5). More specifically, Dean explains how the internet of the 1990's and early 2000's saw "blogs and search engines" compete to occupy "the place

of a missing 'subject supposed to know'" (42). This position of authority covers the hole in the Other, whose function the analyst temporarily borrows to have the analysand address the Other. Alongside search engines, Dean writes that the original blogs, as "logs of websites, signposts left by a previous navigator to those who might want to follow his path, trace her links" (42), attempted to solve the problem of "early searchers" of "how can one find something in particular on the internet" through the interpretation of "the truth of the searcher's desire" (41-2). *Liveblog* documents the success of the search engine in fulfilling this function of the subject supposed to know: "watching 'tweaking on meth in walmart' videos on youtube. i wanted them to keep going… [they] were recommended to me… youtube thinks i want to watch stuff move differently" (317). Beyond what *Liveblog* documents, the project also returns to Dean's description of the original blogs, which attempted an alternative interpretation of the searcher's desire than the algorithmic one. *Liveblog* reads the desire of its (initially digital) viewer who is equally implicated in the project, enjoying its "embarrassing horrific display of a person" (576), an enjoyment that is questioned at points: "how do people look at this" (372)?

What does *Liveblog*'s horrific display demonstrate? In Lacan's second seminar, he refutes an unnamed author's positioning of the analyst as "a live mirror" (*Seminar II* 241) for the analysand. Instead, Lacan articulates the analyst not as a "living mirror, but an empty mirror," one in which the subject "doesn't recognise" (246) themselves, but senses only the hole previously concealed by their mirror image. Here, Lacan maintains fidelity to "the great Freudian insight" that "while we *imagine* ourselves to be closed, consistent and self-conscious units… we owe the irreducible singularity of our subjectivity to a repressed nexus that our self-image or identity excludes" (Greenshields 27), meaning the unconscious. At one point of *Liveblog*, Boyle experiences just such an encounter with an empty mirror, via her computer's screen, when she "tried to screenshot the reflection of [her] face in computer and was shocked a little, to not see [herself] in the screenshot, like that meant [she's] dead maybe" (93). Having no reflection, Boyle becomes vampire-like, which is not so much a monstrous distortion of the subject, as a revelation of the subject's true, undead nature. As Žižek explains, it is "clear why vampires are invisible in the mirror: because they have read Lacan and, consequently, know how to behave—they materialize *objet a* which, by definition, *cannot be mirrored*" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 126). Object *a* represents the element of Boyle that cannot be seen within the internet. It exists not IRL, but in the beyond-of-the-internet, the

absence that Boyle carves into the digital space—the lack in the digital Other—which is also the lack of Boyle's subjectivity.

This element is not Boyle's true self, but rather that which Stijn Vanheule writes prompted Lacan's reconfiguration of "his previous ideas on mirroring processes" due to the discovery of "the structurally alien nature of the *object a*" (6). In Lacan's seminar on anxiety, he describes object *a* as "something that is materialized in the image, a rim, an opening, a gap, where the constitution of the specular image shows its limit… the elective locus of anxiety" (*Seminar X* 108). To further illuminate this gap, Lacan describes a subject encountering the gaze of a gigantic praying mantis. The subject is wearing either the mask of a male mantis, which would place their life in danger, or that of a female, allowing them to go on their way. The subject does not know which mask they are wearing. Even more seriously, the nonhuman constitution of the mantis's eyes prevents the subject from seeing their reflection "in the enigmatic mirror of the insect's ocular globe" (*X* 6). Anxiety overtakes the subject, since instead of an Other that validates their self-image, an Other emerges that does not recognize the subject as they would like to be recognized, and whose desire for the subject is unknown, a void that threatens to swallow the subject whole.

Despite the anxiety provoked by Boyle's experience with the blank screen, it is around the hole encountered there that *Liveblog* begins to circulate. Boyle informs others that she will continue liveblogging "until [she dies], this is going to be [her] sole output" (131). Five months into the project, Boyle acknowledges that "liveblog is overtaking [her] life in a negative way and is a source of anxiety and counter-productivity" (585), yet still presses on with the project for another month. Undeniably, this continuation represents a personally destructive act, but the project is political in its continuation. Referencing Žižek, Henry Krips contends that "new political possibilities… for opposing modern regimes of surveillance" involve acts of "overconformity" in which the logic of the system is followed "to the letter, even when ideological 'common sense' suggests otherwise" (98-9). In Žižek's own words, this overconformity involves "actively endorsing the passive confrontation with the *objet a*, bypassing the intermediate role of the screen of fantasy" (qtd. in Krips 99). Similarly, Boyle becomes actively passive toward the void of the digital Other, rather than being merely satisfied with the "little secret pleasures that people derive from its obscene underside" (Krips 99), such as counting one's likes. As opposed to the temperate engagements of the public with the

internet as a mode of visibility, in which people are constantly claiming how they are leaving social media, taking a break from social media, or simply trying to use social media in a more healthy manner—claims which only maintain the minimum distance required for ideology to operate—Boyle submits herself to the internet's visual logic in totality, exposing the hole awaiting each user's search for themselves.

What is revealed about the internet through Boyle's immersion into it, flowing through it like a dye? De Vos points out how digital capitalism threatens to "swallow the ghost of human subjectivity as such… leav[ing] behind only empty shells" (193). With *Liveblog*, the parasitical Tumblr is alive, or at least pulsating with activity, while Boyle's life is increasingly the abandoned carcass, hollowed out into nothingness. The other side of liveblogging is deadblogging, in which Boyle's life is completely over-written by the signifier, that which "cuts into the living body and implants a little piece of death in us" (McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire* 93). With *Liveblog*, this operation is not a minor but rather a major surgery. If the subject must pay "with a pound of flesh" (Lacan, *Seminar VII* 322) to enter the symbolic, then the price goes up under digital capitalism. *Liveblog* is not exactly an outlier to the livestreaming that dominates the contemporary mediasphere. More broadly, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun notes how "users have become *creatures of the update*" in which "*to be is to be updated*: to update and to be subjected to the update" (*Updating to Remain the Same* 2). At all times, subjects feel compelled to present their life through the digital signifier-screen, as well as view others through this screen. Like Boyle, many content-generators suffer burnout, and some disappear from the internet, their fates unknown. These content generators often maintain that their virtual personas are not the real versions of themselves, but, like Boyle, it often requires another post or update to announce this truth: "I'M NOT REALLY LIKE THAT" (*Liveblog* 548). If the psychoanalytic subject exists according to De Vos as a "radical negativity… untraceable and untrackable" (13), then digital capitalism profits from the reification of the absence at the core of the subject. The subject's inaccessibility is made accessible to all, to be enjoyed as a commodity.

True and Trivial Clickholes

Beginning this section on the same topic, Tao Lin finds the vanity search satisfying as well. In an interview conducted by Chandler Levack, Lin is initially described as "sitting on a bean bag chair, while manically Googling himself" (n.p.). In

Taipei's representation of this interview, it is revealed that when Levack (Alethia in the novel) goes to the bathroom, Lin (Paul in the novel) "searched his name in Alethia's email account" (125). Confronted on his self-searching, Lin describes searching for himself as "really fun" (Levack n.p.). Yet across Lin's written output, this satisfaction also bears an underlying anxiety, concerning the ways in which he is mediated by digital search. To look at an example in *Taipei*, Paul smokes marijuana even though he has a medical history of lung collapse. He begins "coughing nonstop" (228) with a strong sensation of his chest burning. Despite the concern of his friends, his first move, while "grinning" is "to find information on the internet about his situation" by "idly looking up 'burned lung' variations on the internet" (228). In this scene, search offers a mediation of reality, even the reality of the body, keeping its real at a distance.

Not only Lin's body, but also his subjectivity is mediated by search. Along with *Taipei*, the pervasive effects of search on Lin are covered in subsequent works, *Selected Tweets* (2015), co-written with Mira Gonzalez, and *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change* (2018). Looking at some examples, search mediates Lin's writing: "googled 'air through window' to find out how to describe air going into a room through a window" (*Selected Tweets* 138). Search mediates his reading: he "discovered [Jean Rhys] by googling variations of 'depressing lonely novel' at night in New York University's library" (*Trip* 56). Search mediates his future: "imagin[ed] someone in 2089 typing in 'tao lin quotes' in google" (*ST* 125), then reading his previous tweet comparing sneezing to screaming. Search mediates his nightmares: he conceives a "horror movie in which [he] discovers both [his] parents have stayed up all night in separate rooms googling something like 'beige neckless giraffe'" (*ST* 80). Search mediates his memories: "a search of 'methadone' in [his] Gmail shows that Sarah and [he] were excited that summer about opiates and other drugs, that [they] discussed how to get more drugs, but [their] relationship ended in November" (*Trip* 58). For Lin, searching constitutes the dominant mode of mediation. Despite what search provides, it also provokes anxiety in how Lin is both subject of search and subjected to search. As in *Liveblog*, the anxiety here involves how these two sides of search appear to not converge, like a Möbius strip with its phantom other side. Paul can search for many things, and he can be searched at many levels, but his search for himself does not ever arrive at its destination.

Taipei captures the experience of a subject within this mode of mediation, both through its content and its form. Secondary characters are introduced by name, age

(generally somewhere in the 20s), artworld and/or academic credentials. As Chuck Leung points out, this style makes it so that "a diligent Googler could probably identify many of the characters depicted" ("No One Is Special" n.p.), establishing a contiguity between the novel and the search engine. Lin himself treats his novel more like a database than a narrative in an interview with Emilie Friedlander. Rather than merely reading his novel, Lin contends that his text is approachable by "search[ing] the word 'dot' [which] I have a lot of times, and… you can discern something from it" (Friedlander n.p.). The first search result in *Taipei* for 'dot' involves:

> Paul imagin[ing] another him walking toward the library and, for a few seconds, visualizing the position and movement of two red dots through a silhouetted, aerial view of Manhattan, [feeling] as imaginary, as mysterious and transitory and unfindable, as the other dot… (24-5)

The dot here evokes the mirror image provided by the Google Maps dot, which represents the subject as they move through a digital rendition of the world. Paul imagines himself splitting into two dots, comforting him as it renders him unfindable and enigmatic as compared to searchable. But Paul is stuck between two choices, one to be unfindable (the second dot), and the other to be totally searchable (the first dot). Returning to the first dot, Paul "briefly imagined being able to click on his trajectory to access his private experience, enlarging the dot of a coordinate until it could be explored like a planet" (25). On one level, Paul fears losing the enigma of his subjectivity; on the other, he wishes for himself to be completely uploaded into the cloud. This paradox constitutes the subject's experience with language itself, in which to speak and be spoken by language involves a necessary loss for the subject, since whichever and however many words are spoken necessarily fail to tell the subject's whole story. As Jean-François Lyotard writes, "consciousness cannot say everything because of its perpetual splitting in search of… the unsayable" (123). Accordingly, the subject speaks to mark their disappearance in language.

Specific to the internet, the user produces content to mark their disappearance into content. To go along with "Paul's nearly continuously high levels of internet activity" (91), there is a fear of this activity implicating himself and those around him, all of them becoming irreversibly mediated. Staring at his friend Calvin making "what sounded like a computer-generated squawking," Paul imagines "the cube of space containing Calvin… reconfiguring itself, against passive resistance from the preexisting configuration of

Calvin, mutating him in a process of computerization" (96). Paul's own identity is already heavily mediated by the internet, expressed in in a series of metaphors for his memory: "unzipping a file… into a PDF" (35), "windows on a computer screen, maximized on top of each other" (53), "an external hard drive that had been taken from him" (75), and "GIFs" (118). Experiencing his own reconfiguration, Paul expresses his vision of history, involving an "increasingly committed and multiplying workforce of humans… converting a sufficient amount of matter into computerized matter for computers to be able to build themselves" until eventually being met by "the computer at the end of everything, which [Paul] would be a part of and which would synthetically resemble an undifferentiated oneness" (167).[8] In response to this nightmare, Paul ponders how he had "written books to tell people how to reach him, to describe the particular geography of the otherworld in which he'd been secluded" (247). He encloses his subjectivity in novels to protect it from the internet.

Similar to Paul's nightmare, Jan De Vos describes the symbolic system as "a machine that uses subjectivity in order to grow, but this cannot but engender the vision, the final fantasy" of the symbolic "only reaching its ultimate end when it swallows whole subjectivity, and, thus abolishes it" (182). To return to the chapter's earlier discussion of masochism, it should be noted that this vision of the Singularity is a fantasy, in which "it is in coming as close as possible to being abolished" (Lacan, *Seminar VI* 123) that the subject imagines their autonomy. In response to the subject's masochism, the internet reshapes the symbolic into more sadistic forms. The symbolic system "becomes unbound and unleashed via digital technology" (De Vos 65), raising fears—which Paul evidently shares—of "safeguard[ing] the precious human agalma from digitalisation" (De Vos 70). But what exactly is it that guarantees human singularity against the generalization of the symbolic?

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[8] John Paul Russo writes how "at a time when the words difference, diversity, and multiculturalism are on everyone's lips, and when postmodernism proclaims the end of totalizing systems, technology has been grinding the world relentlessly together" (24). The differences of race and sex are haunted by an unsettling similarity between individuals, and vice versa. *Taipei* represents this flattening of individuals through how characters are introduced in the novel, with race being left out, as well as any traits that might make a character stand out in distinction from the rest. Stephanie Hsu argues that *Taipei* is haunted by race nonetheless, with "Paul's dread of computerization… resonat[ing] with his suspicion of the racial/ethnic signifier" ("Tao Lin's *Taipei* as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic *Jouissance*" 207), both involving the fear of his particularity being suffused by a generality.

Mari Ruti distinguishes an individual's subjectivity—constituted as an effect of the symbolic—from their singularity, signalling the "rebellious energies of the real that elude both symbolic and imaginary closure" (1). For Ruti, singularity "expresses something about the specificity of the subject's basic life-orientation on the level of the drives and unconscious desire, particularly as these solidify around the fundamental fantasy and the repetition compulsion" (2). This singularity alone prevents the subject "from becoming a 'dead soul'—someone who is dead while still living," caused by becoming "a part of a whole—someone who can be compared to other constituents of the system through a set of universally applicable generalizations" (3). Of course, Ruti's description of being dead resembles being digitized (or racialized), described by Benjamin Bratton as creating "a space of *relationality* between things" or between people as things "that exceeds the relations they might already possess as natural objects" (205). In *Taipei*, this fear of being dead haunts Paul, who is "unable to ignore a feeling that he wasn't alone," that he was being "concurrently recorded as public and indestructible data," placing him "already partially with everyone else that had died" (124). This feeling explains Paul's later Google search for "immortal animals" (217) to better understand his condition. Like Boyle in *Liveblog*, Paul pushes himself to the limits of death through the internet to measure the autonomy of his life. Borrowing the metaphor of being "depleted" (200) from his MacBook, Paul endeavours to deplete himself of life through intensive internet usage while on copious amounts of drugs, a state in which he becomes "zombie-like" (162), to see what remains of himself.[9] Yet, Paul ultimately finds that his singularity cannot be uploaded into the internet, for he exists only as a negativity or "ontological void" (Ruti 38), whose digital uploading time stretches to infinity. The true

[9] There is never much reasoning presented for Paul's drug usage, nor any description of it having pleasurable effects. Having ingested ecstasy, Paul experiences "'overdrive,' which for [him] was a whirring, metallic, noise-like presence that induced catatonia and rendered experience toneless—nullifying humor, irony, sarcasm, intimacy, meaning—so that he became like a robot" (*Taipei* 203). In Matt Colquhoun's introduction to Mark Fisher's *Postcapitalist Desire*, he outlines Fisher's argument that "to self-induce a stoned stupor, chemically or otherwise, was to do capitalism's work for it, as if driven by a Freudian 'repetition compulsion' to artificially implement capitalism's cognitive capture from within, demonstrating the human organism's 'marked … tendency to seek out and identify itself with parasites that debilitate but never quite destroy it'" (1). In *Taipei*, Paul performs an act both similar and different within the context of digital capitalism. Paul allows drugs to excessively mediate his body and mental state to affectively approximate the extent to which the internet excessively mediates his body and mental state. He takes drugs to process physically and emotionally the levels of mediation he is undergoing, as if drugs represented in substantial form the more invisible effects of the internet. Accordingly, Paul's drug and internet usage converge and accelerate together as *Taipei* progresses.

horror of *Taipei* is not the internet, but the unprocessable void within Paul's subjectivity (his singularity) like a corrupted file that cannot be converted in order to be read.

Throughout *Taipei*, Paul attempts to fill this void or hole with objects, making it a trivial hole, rather than marking the edge of the void of his subjectivity, a true hole. There exist three main types of trivial holes in *Taipei*: drugs, the digital screen, and romantic relationships. Demonstrating their contiguity, the three types converge when Paul records his wife Erin (a representation of Megan Boyle) "licking cocaine off Paul's testicles and serving cocaine off an iPhone to Paul" (155). Similar to the events depicted in *Liveblog*, Paul and Erin take a lot of drugs, including Adderall, alcohol, Ambien, caffeine, cocaine, Codeine, Flexeril, heroin, Klonopin, LSD, marijuana, MDMA, Oxycodone, psilocybin mushrooms, Seroquel, Xanax, and mysterious "pink tablets that seemed huge—'disk-like'" (219). Near the end, Paul says, "I'm on eight things right now" (228). In the interview with Friedlander, Lin states that drugs "satisfy a lot for me. Barely anything makes me happy anymore except drugs" (n.p.). To a large extent, the drug usage represented in *Taipei* responds to the Other that Paul fears will engulf him:

> after blearily looking at the internet a little… [Paul] lay in darkness on his mattress, finally allowing the simple insistence of the opioid, like an unending chord progression with a consistently unexpected and pleasing manner of postponing resolution, to accumulate and expand, until his brain and heart and the rest of him were contained with the same song-like beating—of another, larger, protective heart—inside of which, temporarily safe from the outside world, he would shrink into the lunar city of himself and feel and remember strange and forgotten things, mostly from childhood… (94)

The drug protects Paul from the outside world, or the unbearable intrusions of the Other, allowing him to return to a child-like state.

Rik Loose defines drug addiction (or toxicomania) as "the search by the subject for an object which can be administered at will, which would satisfy desire and regulate or keep jouissance at an ideal level" (174). Moreover, it "can function for the subject in a way which is largely independent of the Other," as "the desire of the Other is problematic for addicts" (Loose 174). In one of Lacan's few allusions to drugs, he proclaims that "there is no other definition of a drug than this one: it is something that permits the separation from the marriage with the 'little willy'" (qtd. in Loose 134). Rather than accept castration through the signifier, the drug user attempts to bypass this acceptance

through an attempt at non-phallic jouissance, as the drug does not pass through the symbolic, but rather independently communicates with the subject's body. Along these lines, Paul's increasing drug usage parallels a withdrawal from society, and even the processing capacity of language itself: "Paul began attending fewer social gatherings and ingesting more drugs… sometimes alone, which seemed classically 'not a good sign,' he sometimes thought, initially with mild amusement, then as a neutral observation, finally as a meaningless placeholder" (74). As represented in *Taipei* by Paul's increasing neuroticism about the digital, the problem with drug abuse is that it only strengthens the hold of the Other over the subject, through the subject's attempts to avoid the Other or resist it.

Though Loose initially defines drug addiction as comprising a search, he also later defines it as a protection "against a different kind of desire or search, a search which does not immediately lead to a finding. This is the search for another kind of knowledge… 'knowledge in the real' about the lethal jouissance which drives addicts" (264). In Loose's description, this knowledge "is deeply unconscious, but… has a determining effect on the subject" (178). Drug addiction's constitution of a defence against the split between searching and finding can be generalized to today's phenomenon of internet addiction, where "internet user" takes on additional resonances. Like a drug which promises a sort of personal pleasure without the Other, Yasmin Ibrahim notes how "mass mediated technologies gave way to mobile gadgets, which sought to personalise pleasure, to carve out a solitary state" (3), "seduc[ing] us into private pleasures away from the communal consumption of television into celebrating solitary indulgence" (10). Like the effect of drugs elucidated by Loose, the digital gadget generates a "physical means of toxicity" through dopamine-infused notifications and vibrations that the subject employs to "cut themselves off from [the] painful search" (Loose 264) for the negativity of knowledge rather than the positivity of search results.

Moving onto the next type of trivial hole, Paul is described as constantly "staring at the screen" (94) of his MacBook, or "star[ing] at his Gmail account" (156), at times entering "a continuous cycle" of "refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail" (76) while time passes unnoticed. The internet is a security object for Paul, as suggested when he "pulled his MacBook 'darkly,' he felt, toward himself, like an octopus might" (53). Throughout *Taipei*, the digital screen functions as what Raul Moncayo and Magdalena Romanowicz call a "symbolic screen" which "protects/defends the subject from the Real"

(22), by supporting fantasy formations that fill the traumatic hole with image or text from *our* device. As Moncayo and Romanowicz elaborate, “the fantasy closes the gap and by the same token acquires the characteristic of the gap” (22), repressing the trauma of the true hole into the appearance of a trivial hole. Embodying this function, Paul’s computer’s screen is described as being able to “display anything imaginable” and thus appearing to have “infinite depth” when in reality it was “nearly depthless” (170). As a mode of defence, it enables Paul to mediate the real, with his ultimate fantasy involving moving to Taipei, where “the unindividualized, shifting mass of everyone else would be a screen, distributed throughout the city, onto which he’d project the movie of his uninterrupted imagination” (15). However, *Taipei*’s progression sees this repressed real bubble up in the form of Paul “hear[ing] Erin quietly sobbing… in a manner as if earnestly trying to suppress uncontrollable crying” (214), leading him to “concentrate on discerning if the crying was real, and [becoming] convinced, to a large degree, every time that it was, despite learning, every time… that it was not” (214). The real emerges as a foreign substance to that of reality, seeping from the void screened by that reality. Erin’s non-existent but insistent tears drip from the cracks in the screen. They cause Paul to “[stare], ‘transfixed,’ at the center of the [computer’s] screen, with increasing intensity and no thoughts” (214) to continue to avoid this real.

As an object, Erin is slotted by Paul into two trivial holes, that of his computer’s screen and that of his search for a romantic partner. Lin states in conversation with Levack: “my goal in life is to find a girlfriend” (n.p.). In *Taipei*, this search for a romantic partner automatically reconfigures random objects into objects of his search. After Paul learns that Traci, “whom he… reasonably… viewed as a romantic prospect,” has a boyfriend, he feels “comfort” in knowing that he has a “‘backup prospect’… a specific girl he liked who liked him back” (22-3). He then realizes “he’d been thinking of Anton, that he’d unconsciously de-gendered and abstracted Anton into a kind of silhouette, which he’d successfully presented to himself as a romantic prospect” (23). Paul’s romantic search constantly switches objects in and out, beginning relationships and ending them, until Paul encounters Erin, by clicking on her blog. At this point, the search becomes automatic to the point of not requiring Paul’s action or intervention. He muses how “they would gradually communicate more and maybe begin emailing and—if neither died, entered long relationships, or left the internet—eventually meet in person. Paul viewed this process as self-fulfilling, not something he wanted to track or manipulate” (91). This

process fulfills itself until Paul "[allows] himself to become 'obsessed,' to some degree, with her… reading all four years of her Facebook wall and, in one of Chicago's Whole Foods, one night looking at probably fifteen hundred of her friends' photos to find any she might've untagged" (109). *Liveblog* relates a similar activity of scouring a past romantic partner's digital presence, described by Boyle as getting "caught in a looking-at-pictures hole" (553). It is a trivial hole (a clickhole) rather than a true hole, driven by the attempt to plug the enigma at the heart of the Other with representations. As Žižek states, focusing on a person's internet presence replaces the enigma of the Other with a digital other "who is simply an object of *representation*" (201). This cyberstalking of the other and its ultimate failure to contain the enigma of the Other is examined in greater depth in Chapter 2.

The enigma of Erin reasserts itself toward the end of *Taipei*. Paul makes scary faces at Erin until she tells him to stop, then persists in the activity, seeing Erin's face become "unrecognizable, like the coded overlay, or invisible mask, had abruptly left, revealing the frightening activity—the arbitrarily reconfiguring, look-less chaos—of a personless face [whose] eyes appeared strangely collapsed beyond closure, like rubber bands overlapping themselves" (218). Her face suddenly takes on the blankness discussed earlier with Lacan's example of the subject confronting the giant mantis with its screen-like rather than mirror-like eyes. At an earlier point, Paul describes his own face as a "screen," from which he can go "afk" (107). With Erin, the face (the fetish object of Facebook and many other social media platforms) is pulled back to display a more fundamental screen behind: not the true Erin, but something frightening to both, its emptiness reverberating back onto Paul, causing Paul to hug her "so she couldn't see his face" (218). Yet, what could be called the real of Erin, exposed in a moment when both characters are experiencing "sadness-based fear, immune to tone and interpretation, as if not meant for humans… a nightmare state for an eternity" (218), is not wholly a terror, but also a vision of singularity, an encounter with negative knowledge that deeply impacts Paul. It is not exactly a contradiction that the nightmare and the singularity go together, in that subjects are more likely to avoid their real as opposed to searching for it. Paul's relation with the trivial hole of Erin—the limitless doomscrolling of her Facebook photos—is contrasted by this encounter with her as void, the limit to which he will ever be able to know her.

In the closing scene of *Taipei*, both characters ingest psilocybin mushrooms. Experiencing feelings of depersonalization, Paul places his hand on Erin's pulse, sensing:

> an inconstant unit of unique, irreducible information (an ever-changing display of only prime numbers) that was continuously expressed and that bypassed the parts of them that allowed for deliberation or perception or intuition, beginning and ending in the only place where they were exactly together, undifferentiated and unknowable, but couldn't in their present form, ever reach, like a thing communicating directly with itself, rendering them both irrelevant. (244)

Knowledge in the real makes its presence felt here, linking Paul to Erin, beyond the mirror image. The scene presents what Lacan calls at the close of his eleventh seminar, "rediscovered knowledge" due to the experience of "the limit with which, like desire, [the subject] is bound" (276). The prime numbers Paul temporarily senses within Erin involve what Lacan describes as the goal of analysis, "the eye-opening effect" of the "confront[ation] with the primary signifier" (*XI* 276). The subject can "subject himself to it" (*XI* 276), and assume responsibility for this real. Along these lines, *Taipei* closes with Paul quoting himself saying that "he felt 'grateful to be alive'" (248), a line delivered as if "from what Lacan calls 'the other side'" (Hsu 209). Paul has traversed the fantasy of the search result, splitting himself in the process.

Though Paul notes how he "would forget everything he had thought or felt" (248) from this encounter, it does enable him to reboot his subjectivity, and begin new searches beyond those functioning automatically in *Taipei*. A sequel of sorts, *Trip* relates Lin as having moved on from the searching mode of *Taipei*, foregoing pharmaceutical drugs in favour of psychedelics, for how they "put one in the metaphysical unknown by dissolving ideological, personal and other boundaries" (5). No more romantic relationships: "Tao hadn't had sex, or even kissed anyone, in almost three years… someday, he'd try romantic and sexual relationships again, or maybe he wouldn't" (274). Near the end of *Trip*, Lin accidentally breaks his computer's screen, "suspect[ing] his unconscious—not unreasonably, he felt with interest and approval—for contributing to the 'accident'" (219-20). The event produces a surprising result: "the broken screen looked like a painting of a segment of two-dimensional mountain… detailed with tiny trees and shrubs and grasses… deliberate and lightly stylized as Chinese calligraphy" (220). Moreover, the cracks "resembled a fractally embellished, runelike symbol" (220) of

a house he would visit in the future. This find is only retroactive, rather than comprising the result of a search. The cracked screen, perhaps having occurred while Lin was searching, figures a split between the search and what is found. The subject does not find what they are looking for, but still finds, even if they do not know it yet.

Fear of Finding

The protagonists of *Liveblog* and *Taipei* are intimately acquainted with Google, but metaphorically, the search engine also represents the broader social alignment of searching and finding, which—as discussed in this dissertation's introduction—is still structured by capitalism and the commodity-form. Though neither novel directly addresses digital capitalism, their respective interventions into the search engine of contemporary society bear anti-capitalist implications. In repositioning the find before the search, the novels challenge how contemporary subjects are pulled along by the strings of the search engine toward a finding that will never arrive. As Todd McGowan writes about depression, suffered by both Boyle and Lin/Paul in the capitalist structure of depressive hedonia, this affect "is not the result of failing to obtain what we want but of recognizing that even what we want will not provide the satisfaction that we can imagine" (*Capitalism and Desire* 284). What both *Liveblog* and *Taipei* demonstrate with their protagonists is a more socially widespread fear of finding the negativity within the object of desire. Persistent searching conceals the negative find with the substitute object of accessible search results. Subjects invest in the search engine because, as Matthew Flisfeder informs, "the act of searching out that object—what Lacan referred to as the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire—produces a supplementary form of enjoyment: a surplus enjoyment" (145). Finding threatens to interrupt the unconscious enjoyment of never finding, the satisfaction of saying "that's not it" or "next, next, next" to an endless stream of search results.

Contending that the internet—or digital capitalism more generally—does not capture one's desire ultimately does not challenge the internet, for the internet is a machine of failure, more than it is a machine of success. Its failure to provide for the subject is ultimately more traumatic than it is comforting, revealing the subject's vampiric being, rendered partially undead by the pursuit of a spectral object of desire. More than any of the inventions of capitalism, the internet—with its promise of events like Google's "End of Search" or a Singularity in which subjects become one with the Other—occludes

the necessary obstacle to the subject's reconciliation with the Other, an obstacle that creates a lack in both entities, figured by the object *a*. Rather than attempting to surmount this obstacle which appears to block access to oneself, others, and one's desired object, the subject must, following McGowan, "find satisfaction" in the obstacle, which "replaces an unending and dissatisfying pursuit," and amounts to a "move from seeking the satisfying object to finding the necessity of the obstacle [with] ramifications for the public world" (*Capitalism and Desire* 64-5). In the wake of this finding, the possibility emerges of a search freed from the search engine of digital capitalism, and therefore, a singular subject.

Pushed to its limits, the search engine ultimately fails to encapsulate the subject, not in a positive sense ("the search engine's algorithm does not understand my real desire!"), but rather to encapsulate the negativity of the object *a*. As Jan De Vos contends, "*objet a* will not be digitalised" as it "has no substantial existence, but, rather, signals a void" (212-3). The locating of this void within the internet is the key finding of both novels, prompting an encounter with negativity that ultimately destabilizes the protagonists and embarks them on projects of change. A sober Boyle continues to liveblog to this day on various platforms, relating how her "life has changed significantly in some ways since 2013, and [she has] a little too, but [she doesn't] really know how or in what ways" ("2020 Liveblog"). Meanwhile, Lin's project following *Taipei* describes a period of his life in which "change becomes a kind of practice" (*Trip* 205). In both works of autofiction, a negative finding leads to a different mode of searching than the one previously being conducted. The novel remains an exceptional form for freeing the subject from the guiderails of socially constructed searches.

Chapter 2

Searching for Others: The Intersubjectivity of Google Stalking in *You* and *Sympathy*

In Becca Rothfield's essay about Google stalking her ex-boyfriend's new partner, Google is shown restructuring intersubjectivity at a visual level through facilitating Rothfield's "quest to see without being seen" (n.p.). The impetus for her stalking involves being perplexed by the mysterious desires of her ex-boyfriend Adam and his partner Rachel. Rothfield employs the digital screen both to protect herself from this desire—to screen it off—and to investigate their desire—to screen it as a series of results, which can be organized into a coherent image, a fantasy. "Googling Rachel over and over," Rothfield ends up "scroll[ing] through all twenty pages of search results" (n.p.), uncovering music playlists, social media comments, graduation photos, secret pancake recipes, unimpressive 5k times, etc. A dialectic emerges between the expansive image of Rachel that Rothfield draws from Google, and the digital screen that blocks her from truly encountering Rachel. This dialectic is singularly intensified by the scopic affordances of Google in its production of intersubjectivity, generating a powerful libidinal tension, with Rothfield accessing Rachel "every night" while "sweating and scrolling" (n.p.). Frustration swells as the free-flowing movement of "clicking through [Rachel's] pictures" is countered by the static screen that cannot be moved past, since "behind [Rachel's] image were only the looped wire guts of [Rothfield's] laptop" (n.p.). In a description that blurs these computational guts with the guts of Rachel's body (suggesting that the libidinal object involved here is a mixture of cold and warm), Rothfield relates wanting to "stab through my screen and graze her… cut into her body and yank her viscera out… plumb all the way to the entrails" (n.p.). The intervening screen provided by Google allows Rothfield to visually objectify the mysterious desires of Rachel (and Adam for Rachel) into a perusable image. But what is behind the screen also engenders a more troublesome object, which Rothfield is forever cut off from since it does not physically exist, but only psychically insists. The object lures Rothfield deeper and deeper into Rachel's digital representation in search of an encounter with it.

Rather than Rothfield's obsessive searching for Rachel representing a unique relation, this chapter contends that her Google stalking indicates a more far-reaching

modification of intersubjectivity, one with potentially troubling implications, as connoted by the metaphorical violence of Rothfield's language. Shifting from Rothfield's personal essay to its social context, there is difficulty in clearly defining problematic digital relations, since users are constantly encouraged to make themselves visible, view each other, like each other, and search for each other. In Daniel Trottier's study of the normalization of "interpersonal surveillance" (46) through social media, his interview subjects note how innocuous viewing of another's digital profile often bleeds into "creeping" which itself is "seen as a milder version of stalking," lacking the "actively searching" (96) element. Google provides a gateway to active searching, cloaking the hunt for the other with banality. Providing evidence for this point, Caroline Kepnes's *You* (2014) features a scene in which Guinevere Beck—narrator Joe Goldberg's object of obsession—catches Joe already knowing her favourite film, due to having previously studied her through Google: "'so you're stalking me,' [she says] without a trace of sadness" (90). Joe replies: "well, I wouldn't call it stalking… it's not like it's private or anything" (90). Laughing, Beck admits to having searched for him as well, so that she could "look at [his] pictures" (91), though she finds that he is not on social media (which does not mean that he is not on her social media). In this scene, Google stalking appears more as a mainstream mode of relating to others rather than a problematic behaviour. Nevertheless, *You* is not a romance novel, but a horror novel, ultimately revealing the interpersonal violence underlying this mode of relation. While Rothfield contends that "what distinguishes online stalking from its dangerous, 'IRL' analogue is that no online stalker wants to meet, much less seduce or harm or abduct, the object of her obsession" (n.p.), Joe does want to do all these things, and when the digital object of his obsession and the living version fail to align, there are brutal consequences.

This chapter argues that the unidirectional visual dynamic of Google stalking displaces the necessary trauma of the subject's encounter with alterity, particularly the alterity of the other's desire which instigated Rothfield's search. This argument follows Byung-Chul Han's point that though "social media and personalized search engines set up… a space of absolute closeness" with the other, the user is simultaneously distanced from the other, being led by the curatorial logic of platforms into seeing "oneself everywhere" (*The Transparency Society* 35-6). According to Han, the user thereby avoids the "negativity of alterity and foreignness—in other words, the resistance of the Other" (2). Similarly, Slavoj Žižek contends that the internet converts the "obscene

ethereal real presence of the Other [into] the Other who is simply an object of representation" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 200-1). This chapter turns to two novels, Kepnes' *You* and Olivia Sudjic's *Sympathy* (2017) as tales of narrators who Google stalk to neutralize alterity in a similar manner. In both novels, alterity re-emerges in disturbing forms, returning more potently for having been repressed by the search result. The narrators, Joe of *You* and Alice Hare of *Sympathy*, become caught in the dialectic that defines Google stalking, in which the Other as comforting image and the Other as troubling screen are in an intensified relation with each other.

In both novels, the narrators reassemble the scattered search results of another person—who represents for them some mysterious alterity, rendering them an Other—into a consistent image, enacting what Jacques Lacan calls "the function of images" in establishing a "point-to-point correspondence of two unities in space" (*Seminar XI* 86), the viewer and the object viewed. In other words, the narrators develop a strong attachment to this unified image of the other, a reflection of themselves as similarly unified. In both narrators' searching, however, the other as a translucent image (the other as result) is countered by the other as an opaque screen (the other as question). Joan Copjec argues that the subject is constituted more by the screen, the opacity of the signifier, behind which there is "nothing at all," than by the (mirror) image: "it is what the subject does not see and not simply what it sees that founds it" (35-6). The subject's scopic desire shifts from being directed at the image (active) to being produced by the screen (passive). Despite Copjec's point that the screen of "representation actually conceals nothing… there is nothing… beyond the visual field," she clarifies that "the fact that representation seems to hide, to put an arbored screen of signifiers in front of something hidden beneath… is not treated by Lacan as a simple error that the subject can undo" for this perception of an invisible beyond "*founds* the subject" (35) at the level of desire and fantasy. Consequently, Google's exponential increase of visual access to oneself and others, fuelled both by the oversharing now common on the internet, and by unwilling capture as well, produces not so much more knowledge about the other, as an increased suspicion of there being something concealed. This fantasy prompts ever more aggressive actions by the subject to plumb the depths of the represented other, searching for what is behind the screen, "seek[ing] after an impossibility" (Copjec 36). Both *You* and *Sympathy* illustrate how Google and its digital distributaries accelerate this search today, transmogrifying the rigid surface of the digital screen into an endless

depth, and thereby concretizing the logic of fantasy. Both novels demonstrate that what awaits Joe and Alice at the bottoms of this imaginary depth is not a human other, but rather an impossible, unconscious object that is the offspring of their interactions with Google, what Lacan called the object *a*, both cold and warm at the same time.

Before discussing the novels, it is useful to elaborate Lacan's theory of fantasy in its imaginary, symbolic and real dimensions, as it will provide the foundation for how this chapter approaches Google's modification of intersubjectivity. In J. Reid Meloy's influential work on the psychology of stalking, he stresses "the force of fantasy as a central component" in establishing a "narcissistic link" (1) between perpetrator and victim. As Meloy notes, "fantasy can play an even more expansive role" in cyberstalking, as "targets become easily available containers for [the stalker's] projections, and narcissistic linking fantasies" (11). Meloy hypothesizes the stalker's mindset as: "if I can see her privately, perhaps I can come to know her intimately, to be with her in fantasy, and to perhaps be more like her. Then she may know me" (1). Cyberstalking enhances the scopophilic dimension of stalking, increasing the capacity for private, passive, visual consumption of the other. Though Meloy frames the fantasy of stalking as involving "the goal to possess" (20) the other, cyberstalking brings out the element of fantasy outlined by Lacan, the goal of being possessed through the lure of the screen, indicative of a passivity that extends across Google-led intersubjectivity. Google stalking is ultimately more passive than active, as the digital screen only lures the user into an endless uncovering, facilitated by the algorithmic logic of platforms.

To begin with the imaginary, André Nusselder explains that it is "in the narcissistic matrix of the mirror stage [that] we can find [Lacan's] first paradigm of fantasy" (*Interface Fantasy* 86). In the mirror stage, the infant is transfixed by an externalized image, their inner turbulence momentarily distilled into a coherent reflection. Rather than constituting a developmental moment, the visual staging of the mirror persists in mediating the subject's relation with themselves and the other. At the level of the self-relation, Nusselder comments on how the externalized image "lures us," through "an (unconscious) absorption in something (a virtual image) that the subject itself is not (in the real)" (88). The mirror image produces a fundamental alienation of the subject according to Dylan Evans: "Lacan coined the term EXTIMACY to designate the nature of this alienation, in which alterity inhabits the innermost core of the subject" (9). Not only producing a self-relation, the mirror stage also produces an equally problematic relation

with the other, in that the subject perceives a visual likeness to the other as a *semblable* (counterpart). As Evans explains, the "image of another person's body can only be identified with insofar as it is perceived as similar to one's own body, and conversely the counterpart is only recognised as a separate, identifiable ego by projecting one's own ego onto him" (30). Evans writes that this "dual relationship between the ego and the counterpart is fundamentally narcissistic" (84). Moreover, it instills the subject's aggressivity due to an aura of deception and veiling problematizing the visual pleasure engendered by the imaginary relation.

If the imaginary is all about how the subject sees, then the symbolic is all about how the subject is seen. Though the mirror stage illuminates the imaginary dimension of fantasy, it also contains an important symbolic dimension. As Stijn Vanheule writes, the symbolic "Other is present in the figure of the adult who is seen by the child as a witness of the moment the small child recognizes himself… who is asked to verify the mirror image and approve it" (3). In this need for the Other to verify the self-image, the subject is absorbed into what Žižek calls the "radically intersubjective character of fantasy" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 8), in which the approval of the self-image by the Other is placed into question. The Other's recognition of the subject, upon which "the subject's very identity depends" (8), leads to "the focusing of attention on the enigma of the impenetrable Other's desire ('*Che vuoi*?')" (8). The subject posits an "*agalma*, secret treasure" within themselves: "*objet petit a*, as the object of fantasy… that 'something in me more than myself on account of which I perceive myself' as 'worthy of the Other's desire'" (9). At this point, Žižek makes clear that the subject is no longer fantasizing through their own eyes but rather fantasizing through the Other as a lens: "What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?" (9). In this way, fantasy produces a fundamental passivity in relation to the Other. Object *a* here is not what the subject desires, but what the Other desires.

As Lacan puts it in his seminar on fantasy, reality is "nothing other than a *montage* of the symbolic and the imaginary," constituting an anamorphosis of "the *real*, which is never more than glimpsed… when the mask which is that of the phantasy vacillates" (*Seminar XIV* 7). Robert Kilroy explains that the real here represents "the deadlock of human desire" in which the subject's desire is the Other's desire rather than their own, a problem which "can be neither overcome nor abolished" (7). Instead, this problem must be modified as Kilroy writes by "the twofold function of fantasy" in which

"an opaque surface (a 'screen') intervenes to block the direct encounter with the other's desire and produce *objet a* as an excessive remainder; second, the subject's over-proximity to *objet a* is displaced and jouissance is given substantial consistency as a fantasy object when the opacity of the screen is elided" (2) through the projection of an image upon it. Fantasy allows the subject to deal with the traumatic real of the Other's desire (in a distorted form), producing what Nusselder describes as "a medium or space in which we (psychically) exist" (*Interface Fantasy* 140). The psychical screen manifested by fantasy facilitates the uneasy negotiation of the subject with the Other's desire: blocking, filtering, and projecting. Paradoxically, the screen always both conceals too much, causing the desire of the subject, and reveals too much, causing anxiety.

To work with an example, Lacan's eleventh seminar features an anecdote involving a moment of fantasmatic disintegration, a breakdown revealing the structure of fantasy. The story opens with Lacan's identification as a "young intellectual" who desires "desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at sea" (*Seminar XI* 95). Apparently realizing his desire, he ends up on a "frail craft" (95) out in the ocean with some local fishermen, enjoying the "risk," "danger," and "excitement" of this profession, among some "fine days" (95). While waiting to pull in the nets, a young fisherman points out to Lacan a sardine can bobbing in the waves, "glitter[ing] in the sun" (95), and cries out: "*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you*!" (95). Unsettled, Lacan notes that the can "was looking at me, all the same… at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated" (95). The point of light is also the "point of gaze" (96) representing a limit to the subject's mastery over the visual field. The limit's "play of light and opacity" (96) hints at something which cannot be grasped, its "fire" (94) unable to be handled by the eye: "light flows over… necessitat[ing] around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defences… to protect what takes place at the bottom of the bowl, which might, in certain circumstances, be damaged by it" (94). For Lacan, this physiognomy of the eye "reflects" (96) the structure of the subject in relation to the real.

Lacan's adventure and the desire expressed therein depends upon the gaze of the Other; he wants to be seen by the Other as different from who he is, to have his bravery and camaraderie with the fishermen registered by the Other's gaze. Like any subject, Lacan requires this gaze to desire, with his desire being the desire to be desired

by the Other. Yet, the sardine can demonstrates the limits of Lacan's seeing, the limits to his own seeing of himself. This failure causes the Other's now unmediated gaze to suddenly take possession of the visual field that the subject thought they were in control of, leading to Lacan suddenly feeling "rather out of place in the picture [painted] in the depths of [his] eye" (96). The only solution for the subject is to assert the function of the screen once again, by "introducing into this field a small screen, which cuts into that which is illuminated without being seen, mak[ing] the milky light retreat, as it were, into the shadow, and allows the object it concealed to emerge," thereby "re-establish[ing] things" (107-8). It is only the screen of fantasy, operating as what Lacan calls a "locus of mediation" (*XI* 107) that enables a negotiation between the subject and the gaze of the Other. In concealing themselves behind the screen, the subject assumes "the form of the screen" (*XI* 97), meaning the particular shadow cast by the manner in which the subject tampers with the Other's gaze, without which they are formless.

How does the screen discussed by Lacan interact with the multiplicity of actual screens looked at by subjects today? In Erkki Huhtamo's archaeology of the material screen, he describes how "an increasing part of our daily lives is spent staring at screens" (31), from those of cinema to television to phones to computers. A psychoanalytic addendum would note that subjects have always stared at screens, but not simply material screens. From Sigmund Freud's screen memories to Lacan's screen of fantasy, psychoanalysis posits a psychical screen at work within what the subject sees, whether in dreams, daydreams, memories, or reality. While there exists a screen in front of the subject's eyes, there also exists a screen behind the subject's eyes. These two screens are dialectical, as Allan Rae describes:

> two possibilities for the origin of the screen for Lacan: either the screen-object, as it arises through various historical functions and meanings, is an expression of a deeply-seated, 'primal' unconscious screen already at work throughout the development of human perception; or the screen-object is that which allows Lacan to postulate a screen function insofar as we can understand it in this sense in the first place. (72)

Screen objects, from cave paintings to masks to digital screens, enable a cultural, collective negotiation with the Other's desire, the very foundation of human society. This negotiation is both social and personal. Within any given society there exists what Rae calls "the cultural production of the screen" in which the screen assumes "a particular and ubiquitous cultural form represent[ing] a perpetuation of the very structural element

which permits the subject his or her entry 'into' culture" (131). In this way, Lacan's theory of the psychical screen is integral to a cultural analysis of today's screen culture, and vice versa.

Does something unique happen to the psychical screen in the internet age, where the production and commodification of screen objects increases? Speaking of the screen or "frame through which one can glimpse the Other Scene—the elementary dispositif of fantasmatic space," Žižek proclaims "the interface of the computer [as] the last materialization of this frame" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 98). For Žižek, the convergence of the two screens does not represent a relationship, as "there [is] no place in [the digital screen] for the phantasmic screen, since the digital screen generates the screen itself" (212), as an outsourced production. What results is the "abolition of the phantasmic screen which served as the gateway into the Beyond turn[ing] the whole of reality into something that exists only on screen, as a depthless surface" (212). However, Žižek's argument came before the restructuring of the internet by platforms, a shift marked by Kilroy as an intervention "*into the technologically-mediated encounter itself*" (11). Looking specifically at Facebook and its restructuring of intersubjectivity, Kilroy points to Facebook's social network as "the dominant social fantasy of our times" (13), producing "the network within which 'the empty space of the fundamental impossibility'" of intersubjectivity "is filled out with an imaginary, fantasy scenario in which the platform intervenes as a 'natural barrier' between subjects" (11). Within this network, "although we know very well that our Facebook exchanges are purely virtual—that we are not engaging with an actual person but a profile page—our activity remains guided by a fetishishistic disavowal: we remain fascinated by what lies beyond the online mask" (12). The Beyond alluded to by Žižek regenerates itself behind the screen of the digital other, so that searches proceed *into* the screen, rather than sliding along a depthless surface. For Kilroy, this fascination with an interpersonal Beyond leads to an "eroticisation-aestheticisation of the social bond" (15), in which "the obverse of one's public engagement" on digital platforms, "one's exchange with friends, one's sharing of content… is the private, passive enjoyment of the primary content of other people's profiles (their photos, their likes, their dislikes, their friends, etc.)" (12). As Rothfield puts it similarly, "the point of all our posting and all our talking is only to mask our stalking" (n.p.), in which we are libidinally exploring each other as fantasmatic objects.

To flesh out Kilroy's theoretical argument, *The Social Network* (Fincher 2010) provides an illuminating representation of Facebook's genesis. The film opens with a face-to-face conversation at a bar between Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) and his girlfriend Erica Albright (Rooney Mara). It is as if a screen is interposed between the pair, blocking their successful communication with each other. Amid bragging about his superior intelligence, Mark unsuccessfully attempts to grasp the meaning of Erica's ambiguous statements to him, while she evades his calculation of her. "Mark, I'm not speaking in code," Erica claims, to which he later retaliates: "that was cryptic—so you do speak in code." They break up, causing Mark to angrily rant on his LiveJournal about Erica's masquerade of femininity as "false advertising." Blogging about the non-relationship on his laptop is not enough, as Mark turns to his desktop computer for a better solution. On this second screen, he codes Facebook's precursor FaceMash, which involves putting into relation all the profile photos of Harvard's women students.

These photos must first be released from their non-relation, in this case their poorly secured embeddedness in the webpages of individual Harvard residences. Among various programming maneuvers, Mark employs an "empty search," seeking not to return a specific result—as his fantasy of Erica orientates itself toward—but rather maximum results with an open query, a metaphor for the structure of digital search under analysis in this dissertation more generally in which abundance hides the impossible. Once the pool of images has been collected, a new relation between them is written out upon a fantasmatic screen. With a grease marker, Mark's friend Eduardo (Andrew Garfield) writes "the key ingredient" on the window of Mark's dorm, a chess-ranking algorithm, enabling the comparison of the attractiveness of the women. A popular feature of platforms, a chess-ranking algorithm also drove Tinder's original facilitation of its user's search for a sexual relation. The shot displays Mark in a state of capture—within the frame of the window—as to the relation that the algorithm provides.

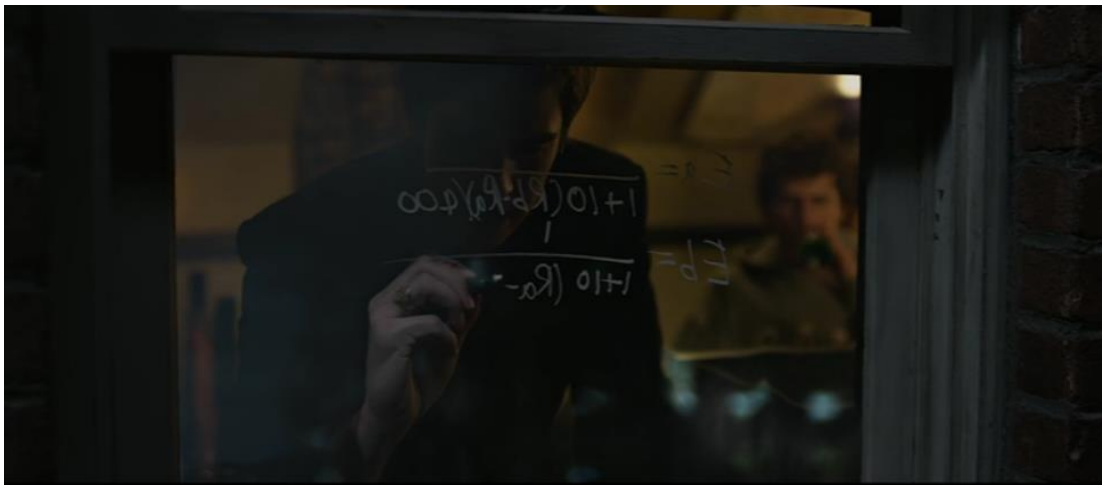

Figure 5: Still from *The Social Network*

Jumping from the film's opening scenes to its closing one, Mark sits alone in a boardroom, searching for Erica on Facebook, now prey to the relation he has designed. Finding her profile page, he sends her a friend request, then begins to repetitively refresh the page, waiting for confirmation, as the film fades to black. Though Mark can quickly access Erica, she gives no response, appearing only as a vacated mask. The screen of Erica's profile page replaces the screen interfering with Mark and Erica's conversation in the opening scene. Along these lines, Kilroy contends that "what drives Facebook's growth and insures its long-term hegemony is the very obstacle which had previously threatened to undermine its smooth functioning: the debilitating deadlock in human speech (its inherent performativity) and human desire (man's desire for the Other's desire *for him*)" (15). While Mark's repetitive clicking of refresh on the screen emphasizes its status as resistant surface, the two novels of *You* and *Sympathy* emphasize the depth model of the digital other facilitated by Google, which allows for deep investigations to be conducted into the other. Nevertheless, these two experiences of the screen as surface and as depth are not separate, but rather dialectical, being the two sides of the same coin that is the digital encounter.

Prior to proceeding, why does the novel offer a privileged form for grasping digital behaviours? Rae speaks of "the novel as nonpareil arena of the dramatisation of subjectivity" (2), in which the screen can be read "as a figure of literature and as a theorisable cultural object" that "produces an effect upon the Subject, is implicated in the subject, in the textual production of the subject, in contemporary literature" (20). Given that both *You* and *Sympathy* orientate their events around the interaction with the digital

screen, their first-person narrations can be read as a stream of subjectivity that emanates from this screen, rather than their subjectivities enveloping this screen. They both offer what Rae calls “a record of a subject as phenomenon of screen” (34). As a point of difference from Rae’s study, the titles of these two novels indicate that their concerns are not just with subjectivity, but rather intersubjectivity. Specifically, they are concerned with their narrators’ addressing of the other through the digital screen, offering a record of intersubjectivity as phenomenon of screen. While the imaginary of this intersubjectivity—the screening of the other as image—enables what Jacques Alain-Miller calls “the primary relation to the other [as] always *a you*,” providing “the foundation of an illusory understanding and feeling of sympathy” (“Paranoia, Primary Relation to the Other” 81), this model involves the elevation of the little other “to the dignity of the Other” (83), thereby occluding the more traumatic relation between subject and Other, which involves an impenetrable screen. In both novels, this traumatic relation reasserts itself in different ways, disintegrating the illusion of the digital other being “*a you*” (Miller 81) who one can sympathize with.

Doomscrolling the Woman

“I found her” (2), Joe Goldberg narrates as MFA candidate Guinevere Beck walks into the New York bookstore which he manages, and into the frame of his fantasy: “you are classic and compact, my own little Natalie Portman circa the end of the movie *Closer*, when she’s fresh-faced and done with the British guys and going home to America” (1). As Joe only elaborates at the ending of the novel, the problem with his fantasy is that “at the end of the play *Closer* upon which the movie is based, the Natalie Portman character gets hit by a car. She dies. In the movie you don’t see Natalie Portman die and I like it better that way” (410). The film instead cuts just as Portman is walking across an intersection, the red pedestrian stop symbol slowly coming into view. Through Joe’s preference for the cinematic adaptation, he represses the impossibility of his fantasy. The entirety of *You*’s narration involves Joe playing out this fantasy, getting closer to his *Closer* fantasy through the digital screen, until he reaches the fantasy’s point of impossibility, where Beck, like Natalie Portman, must die, since his version of Beck was never fully alive to begin with.

As Beck purchases some books in the opening scene, the pair chat about how the internet is ruining society. Joe proclaims to Beck that “eye contact is what keeps us

civilized" (4), then immediately googles Beck after the pair part. Paradoxically, this search begins after Joe has found Beck, since she does not represent Joe's object of desire but rather the object-cause of his desire. Todd McGowan explains how "our desire moves metonymically from object to object without ever successfully obtaining satisfaction in the object that it seeks" since "the object that arouses my desire is not the object of desire itself but what prevents me from obtaining this object, the barrier to an experience of the object's complete abundance" (*Capitalism and Desire* 64). Aided by the obstacle of the digital screen, Joe converts Beck from a flawed woman that he finds to a "good, pure" (87) Woman for whom he searches. This search is doomed in the sense that Joan Copjec writes "if the woman does not exist," as Lacan formulates, "this is because she cannot be refound" (221). In *You*, Beck only exists as a shifting limit to Joe's search. She figures "The One" (11), described by Alenka Zupančič as "the mythical One of exception… which, by being 'cut out'" from the subject's reality "constitutes the frame or the 'window of fantasy'… through which the other can appear as desirable (as object-cause of desire)" (*What IS Sex?* 52). In line with this negativity of fantasy, Joe does not search the internet to see Beck as present on the digital screen, but rather as absent. In Lacan's explanation of the "ambiguity" of the "scopic drive," he contends that what the subject fantasizes about is "the object as absence" in a visual field, adding that "what the voyeur is looking for" with the "objects of his search" is "merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain" (*Seminar XI* 182). Beck's digital representation becomes the curtain, or what Nusselder calls the "veil… on which the absence can 'paint' itself, where the subject can project and imagine the 'impossible' object of desire" (*The Surface Effect* 64). Found as a result of Joe's search, Beck's Twitter profile @theunrealbeck both conceals and reveals the real Beck.

From the beginning to the end of *You*, the digital screen is misrecognized by Joe as the obstacle to his desire for Beck, when it is the screen that produces his desire, and why he continues to search at the novel's end. Through the portal of Beck's singular name, Google delivers Joe a stack of results. Beck is a writer and content creator, and thus has "revealing bios at various online journals that publish [her] blogs (unless you want to call them essays)" as well as public profiles on various social media platforms, to go with a "deluded sense of privacy" (15). For Joe, the earlier maligned internet now becomes "designed with love in mind" in "giv[ing] me so much of you, Beck" (11). As much as Joe is fixated by the physical presence of Beck, he is even more fixated by the

visual stream of Beck that search provides. This digital flow of content screens Beck, allowing Joe to both approach his object of desire, as well as keep this object at a safe distance from himself, mediating his anxiety when in proximity to Beck: “I’m shaking and I’d pop an Ativan but they’re downstairs” (1). Nusselder explains that anxiety “is the too close approximation of the non-representable object” caused by “the impossible object of desire [being] not sufficiently kept at a distance by the fantasy-screen” (*The Surface Effect* 56). This non-representability is more pleasurably encountered on the digital screen, as the cracks in Beck’s digital representation. Upon first searching for Beck, Joe immediately questions the representation that he finds because he does not see himself in it. Beck has recently tweeted, and she did not mention their conversation, prompting Joe’s reaction: “Was I nothing to you?... But then I started to explore you and you don’t write about what really matters. You wouldn’t share me with your *followers*. Your online life is a variety show, so if anything, the fact that you didn’t put me in your stand-up act means that you covet me” (13). Behind the digital screen, Beck waits for him in his fantasy, “searching for that hot guy in the bookstore” (17) on her laptop. His search is for the search of the Other.

Concerning Joe’s disdain for digital artificiality, Mythili Rajiva and Stephanie Patrick clarify that his “critique is not just that Beck uses social media to be seen but also that she presents an inauthentic version of herself to the world: a complaint that has long been lodged against women” along with “misogynist clichés about women’s narcissism and superficiality” (288). Zooming further out on the cultural context of Kepnes’ work, Angela Nagle argues that misogynist communities like 4chan grew in popularity as a reaction to the “female vanity” which for men like Joe define “much of mainstream social media and online culture, in which networks such as Instagram and Facebook are based around personal identity and photographs,” representing “feminized networks” (106). Joe reiterates this attitude toward social media, particularly in terms of what it is doing to relations between men and women: “the world fell out of love with love at some point” (36). Even if the digital screen allows Joe a voyeuristic intimacy with Beck, his mourning for love involves a scapegoating of the internet where users favour “casual encounters” through Craigslist (23) and “complicated” relationship statuses on Facebook (388). From Joe’s perspective, women users prefer to be “busy with [their] fake life in [their] fucking gadgets” (81), rather than form an intimate connection with him.

On a romantic date with Beck, Joe is horrified to find that she has tweeted about it to her followers: “Beck, Beck, this was supposed to be our night, alone. I did this for you. Those slits were for me and that bra was for me and your panties were for me. How is this going to work if you can’t get through a few hours without looking for an audience?” (172). Anointing the sexual act with a special sanctity, he reasons that “there’s no tweeting when you’re fucking” (172). As opposed to the bright glare of the digital gaze, Joe’s fantasy of Beck involves how “[she is] a woman and I am a man and we belong in the dark together” (87), away from the Other’s gaze. Joe cannot accept the Other’s interference with the sexual relation, how it renders intimate experience performative. Unfortunately, Zupančič suggests that the more the subject attempts to remove the Other from sexual pleasure, “the more [they] are bound to find something radically heterogeneous (‘Other’) at the very heart of [their] most intimate enjoyment” (29), as Joe does at the novel’s close. There is no sexual relation without the mediating Other, whether it appears as a digital screen or a screen inside the heads of participants in the sexual act.

Throughout *You*, Joe denigrates Beck’s digital representation as evidence that she is an “attention whore” (13) or an “exhibitionist” (16), thereby repressing his status as voyeur. Interpreting Beck’s profiles, Joe reasons that she wants him to look at her, which he is more than happy to oblige. Through the alluring character of @theunrealbeck, Kepnes represents new visual relations between the sexes on the internet. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Megan M. Wood write that “while women’s bodies have long been objectified in popular media, social media raise new questions key to feminism about women’s agency and responsibility, since social-media platforms ostensibly empower women to operate the technologies that objectify and surveil them” (93). For Dubrofsky and Wood, social media creates a visual environment in which the former “‘objects’ of the gaze are also the producers of the gaze,” simultaneously both problematizing and reinforcing how the “male gaze regulates and structures its object within a social-historical system of gendered domination” (97). Referencing Laura Mulvey’s work on the cinematic gaze, Dubrofsky and Wood draw a distinction in that while “Mulvey positions the feminine onscreen as passive, though inviting of the gaze” (98), social media’s screening of the feminine is typically coded in terms of activity and agency. Nevertheless, similarly sexualized representations of women continue to dominate. Due to women seemingly directing the gaze themselves, Dubrofsky and

Wood note that the discourse of “postfeminism” gains strength, as “a popular cultural context where gender inequality is no longer an issue… leaving a space for intensified and troubling stereotypes of femininity to thrive” (99). In this context, Joe interprets Beck’s digital front as feminine marketing, seeking to attract his masculine attention, thus legitimizing his scopophilia. His looking helps to feed the “hungry public part of [her] that wants to be noticed and observed” (172), an interpretation that resonates with his view of her genitalia, “the soft, hungry magnet that heaves between [her] legs” (394). In his fantasy, the two exist in a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relation of the masculine and the feminine, through the screen.

A distinction should be made between the gaze discussed by Dubrofsky and Wood (indebted to Foucault and Mulvey), and the Lacanian gaze. As McGowan writes in his critique of Mulvey, she locates the gaze “in the spectator” (*The Real Gaze* 5), in the form of “the “determining male gaze project[ing] its phantasy onto the female figure” who in women’s “traditional exhibitionist role” solicits this gaze “for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey qtd. in *The Real Gaze* 8). By contrast, the Lacanian gaze of the Other cannot be particularized to a specific subject, emanating instead from the object, specifically the screen object. Consequently, the truth of the subject’s desire, as expressed in their looking, involves not mastering the Other as in Mulvey’s conception, but rather the “desire to submit… oneself to images of the Other” (9). As McGowan explains, “desire has this masochistic quality because its goal is not finding its object but perpetuating itself” (9). Though “the subject appears to seek mastery, it is actually trying to find another, less traumatic way of relating to its object” (McGowan 11). McGowan’s argument provides a useful perspective on Joe’s search for Beck. Rather than Joe’s search only representing an active engagement, it more significantly represents a passive engagement, in which the object of Beck lures him through the digitally mediated world in an induced state of desire. Joe represses this masochistic element of his desire through BDSM fantasies of mastering Beck.

In a scene that exemplifies the masochism of Joe’s search, he drives to Little Compton to spy on Beck’s vacation with her friend Peach. He finds “Peach’s family’s address online through a combination of an old article in *Architectural Digest* and Google Maps” (257). The ease of Joe’s digital navigation meets the perils of physical navigation, as a snowstorm and wandering deer conspire to drive his Buick off the road. Disregarding his mangled body, he is happy that his “phone is intact” (264), as it is his

true source of movement. Opening Google Maps, he finds that the accident site is “234 feet due west of Peach Salinger’s home,” a surprising proximity that inspires Joe’s reaction: “we really are destined, Beck” (264). Symptomatically, the sense of proximity produced by Google Maps conceals a difficult distance. Joe hobbles toward his destination through the snowstorm in “a zombie sidestep,” tracking his excruciatingly slow progress with his phone: “I’ve gone only *ten fucking feet*?” (265). Search drags Joe toward its shifting destination, with his body suffering its magnetic pull. Here, the visual field of the internet exceeds that of the cinema in facilitating the masochistic desire of the viewer, compelling Joe to pursue the luring image out into the world to the near destruction of his body. At last, Joe checks his phone and “the blue dot is on top of the red dot” (265). This overlap still conveys a separation, rendered palpable when Joe can only gaze in through the window of Peach’s place at the “scene” inside, despite his “uncontrollable urge to jump through the window and enter [Beck]” (267). Rather than enabling mastery of Beck, search only operates to continually displace her to another scene, allowing Joe to continue to desire masochistically, through submitting himself to the red dot as object *a*, the search result of Beck as the screen.

There still exist significant differences between how the gaze functions in the cinema (which McGowan concentrates on), and how the digital gaze functions. McGowan notes how “film has the ability to stage a traumatic encounter with the gaze and with the real as such,” one with “political value” since “it allows spectators to look at themselves—and the prevailing symbolic structure—from the perspective of a void” (*The Real Gaze* 20). For McGowan, singular films bear the potential of momentarily destabilizing the collective fantasy structures of ideology, such as those produced by capitalism. Through revealing the truth of the spectator’s desire, cinema can challenge how the “good consumer must believe in the fantasy of the possible object, whereas the subject who accepts the impossible status of the object no longer seeks this object in the form of the latest commodity” (220). On the internet, the latest commodity is the subject, as Robert Kilroy points out, with “commodity-fetishism [having] shifted to a direct fetishism of the Other *qua* image” (11). The pleasurable consumption of this image reduces anxiety about the Other, as well as generating vast profits for platforms.

Whereas films can compel the spectator to encounter the impossibility of desire through the interruption of visual seduction, platforms thrive on concealing this impossibility through a seamless visual experience. The traumatic moment in the film

when the gaze punctures the screen is replaced by the uninterrupted viewing of doomscrolling. Platforms do not cut, except through an accidental glitch or crash, and many employ cleaners who scrub the user's feed of potentially disturbing content that would interrupt their continual viewing, as shown in the documentary film *The Cleaners* (Block and Riesewieck 2018). The temporal encounter of the cinematic event is diluted into a spatial encounter, in which the screen defends rather than annihilates the viewing subject. As Foivos Dousos writes, the digital "screen is a veil of signifiers" through which "the sliding, or shall we say scrolling, of signifiers is in place to conceal the gaze" (94). The platform always has a fresh patch of screen available for the subject to scroll toward. In this way, the subject can experience ever more strongly the self-deception of mediating the Other's gaze, seeing without being seen, to return to this chapter's opening fantasy. This self-deception only radicalizes the eventual trauma of the Other's gaze, which is what *You* shows in the violence waiting at the limit of Joe's doomscrolling of Beck.

A second significant difference between the cinematic and digital gaze involves the possibility of stepping behind the screen, as Joe frequently does. Films may offer a behind-the-scenes feature, but they do not offer a behind-the-screen feature, in which the spectator can gaze at themselves from the film's perspective, flipping the screen. As part of his efforts to get behind the screen, Joe's searching opens an endless series of doors into Beck's life, both digital backdoors and apartment front doors, as his cyberstalking progresses to urban stalking when Google provides Beck's address. Demonstrating which mode of stalking is dominant, Joe's stalking of Beck in real life aims only at furthering Joe's cyberstalking. After breaking into her apartment, Joe breaks into Beck's laptop, attempting to verify the gaze of recognition that he posits behind the screen, though he only encounters more absence: "I know how to search a hard drive and I know I'm not in there… one possible theory: you write about me in the notepad on your phone" (21). Joe perceives the reverse side of the digital screen as the "inside" (26) to Beck's outside, whose consumption he becomes addicted to through ongoing surveillance of Beck's personal correspondence and other private digital activity from this moment: "I'm so full of you, your calendar of caloric intake and hookups and menstrual moments, your self-portraits you don't publish, your recipes and exercises. You will know me soon too, I promise" (53). In traversing to the other side of the screen, Joe believes he attains knowledge of the Other, neutralizing his anxiety. Stepping behind

the screen appears to allow a direct experience of the Other's gaze, and he endeavours to manipulate this gaze to focus on himself as a loved object.

But behind the screen, Joe only finds more screens. Even in Beck's private digital activity, she "lies to [her] computer" (30). Later, she obtains a secret laptop due to her suspicions that Joe is reading her email, producing yet another digital screen temporarily blocking access, which Joe refers to as "MacBook asshole… smirking at me" (383). In conceiving the digital screen as the fundamental obstacle between the two, which can be traversed through hacking and surveillance, Joe falls prey to the logic of fantasy. McGowan defines fantasy as what "allows the subject to relate to the lost object as an object that is simply out of reach [due to] a spatial or temporal barrier, rather than an ontological one, interven[ing] between the subject and the lost object" (*The Real Gaze* 24). In positing the digital screen as the obstacle between himself and Beck, Joe quiets anxiety over a less negotiable screen between the two. In bypassing the material screens that separate him from Beck, Joe believes he is on her trail, when really it is the screen that produces his search. Exemplifying this structure of desire, Mladen Dolar unpacks Lacan's retelling of the painting competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios. While Zeuxis paints grapes that seduce the eyes of birds, Parrhasios paints a veil that seduces the eyes of the human audience. Explaining Parrhasios's victory, Dolar writes that "humans are deceived by the veil which does not merely imitate reality, but conceals it" so that the "properly human way of deception is the lure" that "entice[s] [the viewer] to penetrate behind the veil of appearance" (77). As Parrhasios's painting demonstrates, unfortunately "there is nothing behind the curtain except the subject himself who has been lured behind" (Dolar 77). Digital capitalism's proliferation of material screens allows for a perpetual luring, in which the subject only encounters themselves, making the eventual encounter with the Other more troubling.

What exactly is the ontological barrier alluded to by McGowan which comes between Joe and Beck? In Žižek's exposition of courtly love, he outlines a "cold, neutral screen" existing between the Lady and her vassal, "which opens up the space for possible projections" ("From Courtly Love to *The Crying Game*" 97). Being "deprived of every real substance," Žižek explains how the Lady is figured by her vassal as an "absolute, inscrutable Otherness" that must then, in a secondary figuration, be covered over by "a narcissistic projection whose function is to render invisible her traumatic, intolerable dimension" (96). References to courtly love abound in *You*, from Beck's

(suppressed) proper name of Guinevere to Joe having to fulfill various tasks for his lady (such as assembling her IKEA furniture), to him being anointed at the peak of their brief romance as Beck's "protector… [her] knight in shining armor" (176). A more significant link, the digital screen by which Joe continually views Beck presents a surface for all kinds of narcissistic projections, so that he can imagine that they "really are the same" (409). Despite Joe flitting between the obverse and reverse sides of Beck, the digital screen still operates for Joe as an untraversable mirror, what Žižek describes as the "mute mirror-surface" (97) of the Lady. Crucially, neither Beck nor the digital screen upon which she is projected construct the ontological barrier, but rather are called upon as its (vanishing, since Beck ultimately disappears) mediators.

Through these mediators, the (male) subject can engage in localized fashion with the transcendent inaccessibility at the heart of desire. For Žižek, the Lady exists as an effect of "sexual difference [being] a Real which resists symbolization" with the "sexual relationship [being] condemned to remain an asymmetrical non-relationship in which the Other, our partner, prior to being a subject, is a Thing, an 'inhuman partner'" (108). Žižek clarifies that the "place of the Lady–Thing is originally empty: she functions as a kind of 'black hole' around which the subject's desire is structured" (100). From the time of courtly love to the present, women are tasked with the dangerous role of the Woman, the limit to the subject's desire. This role-play has no roots in material reality, as Žižek relates how the poetic elevation of women in courtly love saw the "actual social standing of women as objects of exchange in the male power-play [being] probably at its lowest" (108). Nevertheless, Žižek points out that the "semblance" of the role-play "provides women with a fantasy substance of their identity whose effects are real" (108). Today, this role-play accelerates as platforms seek to keep users desiring through the production of a limit, a social role still predominantly fulfilled by women. There is not only the "perseverance of the matrix of courtly love" noted by Žižek (107), but also its online flourishing, evident in the social symptom of "simping," in which users lavish attention upon an unobtainable feminine presence mediated by the screen, an e-girl.

Returning to *You*, Joe's searching for Beck resembles the anamorphosis of courtly love, by which Žižek argues that "the Object can be perceived only when viewed from aside, in a partial, distorted form, as its own shadow—if we cast a straight glance at it, we see nothing, a mere void" (101). Digital search offers not only a way of exposing the object, but also a way of concealing the object. The subject does not want to know

about this structure of desire. Accordingly, what Byung-Chul Han calls “the heroic project of transparency—wanting to tear down veils, bring everything to light, and drive away darkness” only “leads to violence” (44). This violence arrives when the real of the sexual non-relation, repressed by Joe’s searching, can no longer be fully screened. Even with total surveillance, Joe cannot penetrate Beck’s desire. After kidnapping her and imprisoning her in a glass cage in his bookstore’s basement, he asks her in despair: “‘what do you want now?’ The correct answer: me!” (408). Yet, Beck can only tell him that she wants to be an actress, making Joe “squeeze [her] neck to make the wrong answers go away. They fester in [her] bulging eyes [and] must be choked through the bubbles of saliva that ooze from the corners of [her] gnarled mouth” (409). The Lady that was his digital dream reverts to the status of inhuman stranger, becoming “a monster, deathly, *solipsistic* to the bone… because *all* you *want is You*” (410). Joe is only speaking to himself, through the screen of Beck. Though he can step behind the digital screen of Beck, he cannot step behind the screen of his desire. It is only in being lifeless that Beck can fulfill her imposed role as a narcissistic object, lying “so still and all the good in [her] is in [her], beneath those eyelids, latent” (410). Beck is violently, permanently transformed into the true source of Joe’s desire: the screen.

Though Joe is a singularly psychopathic character, his searching style connects with general tendencies in contemporary relations between the sexes. Addressing the protective function of the digital screen, Renata Salecl points to “the erotic deadlock in today’s society [that] arises directly from our attempts to eliminate the anxiety that love provokes and to alleviate the uncertainty that will always accompany desire” (qtd. in Flisfeder 164). Speaking on a similar topic, Eva Illouz outlines how the digital profiles of others instantiate “a state of perpetual desire” (234), in which the user’s “fantasy seems to aim not at the possession of an object, but only itself: that is, the fantasmatic pleasures it provides… anchored in technological objects that objectify and make present the virtual person” (236). Sounding a similar alarm, Alain Badiou writes of love being “comprehensively insured against all risks” in the digital era, as one “will have selected [their] partner so carefully by searching online—by obtaining, of course, a photo, details of his or her tastes, date of birth, horoscope sign, etc.” (6). For Badiou, this meticulous search only avoids the anxiety of the “encounter with the other… an event that remains quite opaque” (24). As a final voice on the matter, Matthew Flisfeder contends that the “enjoyment of our digital devices” with their “simulation of the romantic

relationship" leads to the spread of the "obsessional form of sexual desire, best articulated in the notion of courtly love" in which the man is "enamoured, not with the Woman, but with the pursuit of the unobtainable object" (164). The subject "therefore works to maintain his distance from the desired object" (Flisfeder 164), employing the screen of digital search to avoid dealing with the truth of his desire.

To return to feminism's dilemma with social media (gestured to earlier by Dubrofsky and Wood), Žižek argues that the persistence of courtly love marks "a certain deadlock of contemporary feminism," since its fantasmatic framework provides women "with all the features which constitute so-called 'femininity' and define woman not as she is in her *jouissance feminine*, but as… an object of… desire" (108). Albeit only in conversation with men, Beck admits that she has "*severe narcissistic disorder*" (321), and "love[s] to be wanted" (393). As Joe uncovers through surveillance, she is "talking to like nine different dudes on nine different sites" (60). Beck libidinally searches the internet as well, though in a different way from Joe. Darian Leader writes that "what a woman searches for in the world around her is not an object—female collectors, after all, are extremely rare—but another desire" (6). Complicating Leader's formulation, Beck collects the desires of others, "devour[ing] the 'Casual Encounters' section on Craigslist" while "copying and pasting [her] favourite posts into a giant file on [her] computer" (21). Joe reasons, contra Leader, that "girls like to collect things, be it kale soup recipes or poorly worded, grammatically offensive daddy fantasies composed by desperate loners" (21). This behaviour suggests that Beck is searching the internet as part of an inquiry not into a sexual object, but into the relation between the sexes. It should be noted that this inquiry is conducted in a highly mediated environment, in which the digital screen offers objectified relations, rather than the more enigmatic ones in which Beck ultimately finds herself entangled. Unbeknownst to her, she is being searched as she searches. Just like Joe, the digital screen provides an illusory protective function for Beck from the anxiety of the non-relationship, allowing her to investigate the desire of the Other at a safe distance, or so she thinks.

Following this line of argument, Beck is just as much a subject of the digital screen as Joe, though her fantasy involves maintaining the screen, while his fantasy involves annihilating the screen. Beck's deployment of the screen in its protective function is symbolized in her frequent use of the smiley-face emoji in her correspondence, suggesting what C. Namwali Serpell calls the "pleasure of emoji [that]

derives not from ‘clearer’ communication, but rather from… emoji's failure to communicate” (n.p.). As much as Beck employs the screen to block access to her, she employs it to provide access to her, through screening carefully selected details of her life on social media, performing before the gaze of the Other that it simulates. On this topic, Allan Rae illustrates the prominence of digital perversion, in which “one imagines oneself as the object of the Other's desire… as in possession of the knowledge, in the Real, of *objet a* for the Other,” and thus “surround[ing] oneself with screens” (261), which provide a mediated, and therefore enjoyable, experience of the Other’s gaze.

In sum, *You* depicts Joe and Beck both being in love with the digital screen, rather than with each other. In Lacan’s eleventh seminar, he critiques Aristophanes’s framing of the subject’s search for love that:

> pictures the pursuit of the complement for us in a moving, and misleading, way, by articulating that it is the other, one’s sexual other half; that the living being seeks in love. To this mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever… (*Seminar XI* 205)

For Lacan, it is only the “lure of the screen” (105), in which “the subject is presented as other than he is” (104), that produces sexual attachment: “it is no doubt through the mediation of masks that the masculine and the feminine meet in the most acute, most intense way” (107). The internet’s masking possibilities only increase the intensity of the masculine and the feminine rebounding off each other, in their mutually lonely search for a sexless object.

To conclude this section, relegating Beck to Joe’s level of subjection to the screen is not fully accurate. Amid Joe’s surveillance, he finds that she writes “true and beautiful” emails addressed to her ex-boyfriend Benji but “they all get stored in drafts” (68). Writing of “the enigma of the [woman’s love] letter which is written but not posted,” Žižek contends that these letters are not addressed to an actual partner, but rather their “true addressee is the gap of absence itself… which provides *jouissance*, since *jouissance* is contained in the act of writing itself, and since its true addressee is thus the writer herself” (*Less than Nothing* 751). This alternative form of jouissance is defined by its object not existing on the other side of the screen, where the object of masculine (phallic) jouissance must reside. The feminine subject’s relation to jouissance is split, between a jouissance with a man that also involves the screen, and a jouissance that

involves the impossibility of the sexual relationship. As Žižek expounds, the woman's "ultimate partner is not the other human being, her object of desire (the man), but the gap itself, that distance from her partner in which the *jouissance féminine* is located" (753). Beck's unsent emails do not move toward an addressee located behind the screen, but rather sit idle in the space of the screen itself. Like Žižek, Zupančič states that the "infamous 'feminine *jouissance'* is not an obstacle to the sexual relation, but a symptom (or marker) of its nonexistence" and it is "no wonder, then, that it has been subjected to such violent forms of exorcism in the course of history" (*What IS Sex?* 54). Characters like Joe and their real-life analogues represent only the latest form of this violent exorcism.

The Search Result Inside

Sympathy features narrator Alice Hare caught in the Google-driven dialectic of surface and depth, in which behind the screen image of another person, she is "sure there is something very deep, lying far beneath the surface, which, if disturbed, maybe even provoked, might finally come up for air" (6). Concurrent with Alice's plumbing of these digital depths, *Sympathy* foregrounds the opaque screen that refuses to budge in accessing the other, figured by the digital screen. The novel opens with an extended description of an encounter with the erotic surface of the digital screen. Alice unfollows on Instagram her obsession, writer Mizuko Himura, as an attempt at visual sobriety, since her scopophilia is derailing her life. In being unfollowed, the abyssal layers of images that previously represented Mizuko are replaced with an impenetrable surface. Mizuko's privacy settings cause "a white wall [to descend], blank except for a padlock symbol" (1) and "her defiant little mouth, just visible in the porthole containing her profile picture" (2). Alice presses "her index finger repeatedly against this wall," and touches the mouth with her fingertips: "it was hard and would admit nothing. Her face was hard too. It denied, or felt nothing" (2). In following Mizuko's Instagram, Alice had been offered a window not only into Mizuko's life, but life itself. As Alice recounts, Mizuko's "presence, and telepresence, had given shape to [her] life in New York" but "now, with the stroke of a finger, [that shape] had gone" (1). Alice's digital relation with Mizuko constituted not only an obsession with the other, but a way of stabilizing her own subjectivity under the gaze of the Other.

The relation between the two women originally begins through the intersubjectivity of Google:

> anyone could find [Mizuko]. Just by typing her name they would get an instant synopsis of her life: the neat grid of her pictures, captioned with her thoughts and feelings, tagged with a location and timestamped. Anyone could track her progress through the city, or slip backwards into her past, to her vacations and graduation. I couldn't have been the only one who'd done it so successfully. (1)

Nevertheless, this voyeuristic relation is fragile, shown by the sudden bricking up of the window. Desperate for a "back door" (2) into Mizuko, Alice searches the Instagrams of her friends, "hoping to find her sheltering in one of their pictures" (2). She is unsuccessful, leaving her with Mizuko as a screen that causes her to be "tortured… with grim fantasies [of] what was happening behind the wall" (3). Rather than decreasing Alice's visual pleasure, the sudden imposition of opacity between the two instills a mix of "longing and revulsion" which "where they met, [Alice] felt sickly warmth seep up from the mattress" (4). While Alice's previous searching for Mizuko resembles the movement of desire, seeking both to possess and be possessed by her, the opaque screen she arrives at in this opening scene generates only jouissance.

Unlike Joe with Beck, Alice initially encounters Mizuko through the digital screen; like Joe with Beck, Alice conceives of the screen as a momentary obstacle between the pair, though it is through the screen that she desires. After "stag[ing] a collision" (246) with Mizuko in real life, the two gradually begin to become entangled until they spend all their moments together, helped along by Alice's deep research into Mizuko. As Alice explains, their early conversations resemble a "Mobius band" in which Alice asks "questions with answers that [she] already knew" (204). In lowering the digital screen between them, a more difficult screen appears, amplified by its prior occlusion through the digital screen. Lying in Mizuko's bed with her "body on fire," Alice describes feeling she has "gone from lover (intimate, easy in her company, despite her never knowing [she] was there) to stranger" (8). Mizuko's body, not as the "imperceptible" pores of her selfies, but as "toe-nails, gums, and vertebrae" (9), causes Alice to feel overly "close" (8) to her. Hardness emanates from Mizuko's sleeping body, in that Alice cannot "stretch out [her] hand through her body, push it out the other side, or turn her over in [her] palm" (8). The pair eventually share a kiss. Alice expresses the desire "to go through" (263) Mizuko, to pass to the other side of her. Instead, their physical intimacy feels "like staring

into a mirror, never actually touching the other body even though you pressed yourself against it" (262). The pair's physical intimacy only mimics Alice's pressing of her fingertips into Mizuko on her phone. Mizuko herself appears to be aroused not by Alice, but by the fact that due to their entanglement, Alice smells of her (264), facilitating a mutually narcissistic and masturbatory encounter. The realization that there is nothing behind Mizuko, no other side as suggested by the digital screen, only intensifies Alice's attempts to move behind the screen. She breaks into Mizuko's phone, whose screen feels "jellied or slimy" to her touch, relaying how "it was the most surreal experience at first—to be holding the device, the source of her power, the source of contamination" (268). She searches its contents, and finds a folder of sexts titled "SOCIAL," which she masturbates to, experiencing "a bizarre, not necessarily pleasurable feeling" (268). This enjoyment comes from an attachment to the screen itself over Mizuko, who Alice hides from in the bathroom while fucking her phone.

Behind Mizuko as a screen, Alice posits a radical Otherness, an external mystery whose resolution will resolve the mystery of her own inner turmoil. Blocked on Instagram, Alice lays "a million traps" for Mizuko, so that:

> whenever she does or says anything, or anyone else does or says anything in connection with her, across whichever ocean, the name reaches me in a Google alert. Each time I reel in the net, experience rapture for about one second, and am then overcome by acute nausea. I will read without breathing, scanning to see if any of her words are about me, or secretly addressed to me, and feel a creeping mortification when nothing stands out and she slips back into the water. (6)

In Alice's submission to the digital screen of Mizuko, she illustrates the structure of fantasy in that her desire to possess Mizuko—for their bodies to be "bodies snapped into alignment" (4)—ultimately runs secondary to her desire to be possessed by Mizuko. Alice desires Mizuko's "way of seeing the world" (85), grasped through her style of digital curation, as an external gaze that can be directed upon Alice herself: "I was a plain thing she [could] transfigure into something more interesting by looking at me" (85-6). Alice does not have to imagine this gaze, but rather can inhabit it: "I had spent so much time looking at things through Mizuko's eyes, from her exact height or posture, that I felt I could almost predict what she was about to do next" (246). Nevertheless, the Other's gaze cannot be so easily externalized as Alice's fantasy suggests. Instead, the Other and the subject are interlinked to the point that boundaries of internality and externality

are unstable, signaled by the extimate structure of object *a*. Lacan explains object *a* through reference to the topology of the Möbius strip, in which the internal and the external sides lie on the same surface. Their coinciding cannot be grasped at the specular level by the subject, which Lacan compares to an "insect that wanders along the surface of the Möbius strip form[ing] a representation of the fact that it is a surface" that has "another face that he hasn't explored" (*X* 136). Unfortunately, "there isn't one," a non-existence that engenders the object *a*, this "little missing piece" (*X* 136) of Otherness that forever eludes the subject. Alice imputes this Otherness to Mizuko, existing on the other side of the digital screen.

The aggressive searching for Mizuko emerges from a contradiction between the object of desire's extreme online specularity, and the non-specularity of object *a*. Mizuko is a visual feast for Alice's eyes, enhanced by taking the drug Provigil, which heightens "visual stimulus" (332), leading to long sessions of "dissect[ing] the pictorial equivalent of [Mizuko's] DNA" (76). Being non-spectatorial, the subject moves toward object *a* not to possess visual representations of it; instead, object *a* emerges out of gaps of non-specularity in a visual representation. At one point, Alice searches for images of Mizuko's apartment, and having copied them with a "screenshot," she "zoomed in as far as [she] could go before it pixelated" (256), converting a representational image into an indeterminate one, a public image into a private one. Alice identifies with this blob of pixels that can be reformulated back into a coherent image, by zooming back out. The truth that Alice's cathexis onto Mizuko's digital persona is ultimately narcissistic appears when "look[ing] down into the dark screen" of her phone for a message from Mizuko, she sees her "own face reflected back at her" (371), the reality of Alice's seeing of herself "in [Mizuko]" (87). Yet, *Sympathy* does not simply represent the narcissistic play of images amid the "mirrored walls" (400) of the internet. Rather, the novel represents how an intimate, bodily part of the subject is both dispersed and pursued in this play within the field of the Other, the non-specular object *a*, the part of the subject "lost forever" (*Seminar XI* 205) according to Lacan. As Stijn Vanheule writes, the object *a* signals some "organic aspect of the body [that] is not entirely enveloped by the mirror image" (7). While the mirror phase involves the subject's projection of an internal confusion onto an external image, the object *a* binds the internal and the external, forcing the lacking subject out into the world to recover an intimate part of themselves they never had. It is digital search that dominates Alice's approach to object *a*, with its capacity to continually

produce new screens for Alice's interactions with Mizuko, keeping her between the accessible and inaccessible. Ultimately, the radical Otherness that Alice posits behind the digital screen of Mizuko erupts from within Alice herself as a non-spectatorial object *a*. The search result is inside her.

Before progressing to the result of Alice's searching, what are the opening conditions of her search? How does she become lost in Googleland? Throughout *Sympathy*, searching is not just occasionally indulged in, but rather Alice's character flows through the constraint of the Google search box. She meditates on its role in her life: "stop a moment to think of your life without Wikipedia. Sweet source of eternal comfort. Ministering angel of information. Think of your life without the option to Internet search" (346). This juxtaposition of Wikipedia and the search engine speaks to how Google renovated its search result page in 2012, so that it would display a Knowledge Panel on the right, with the content largely exported from Wikipedia. The two websites amplify each other, each holding up one end of a frame of reality. Though Google and Wikipedia curate in different ways the information that they present for factual accuracy, a multiplicity of fantasies can still be projected onto this frame. For instance, the Charleston shooter's manifesto describes how:

> The event that truly awakened me was the Trayvon Martin case. I kept hearing and seeing his name, and eventually I decided to look him up. I read the Wikipedia article and right away I was unable to understand what the big deal was. It was obvious that Zimmerman was in the right. But more importantly this prompted me to type in the words "black on White crime" into Google, and I have never been the same since that day. (qtd. in Noble 111)

On this topic, Safiya Umoja Noble notes that "search is a symbiotic process that both informs and is informed in part by users" (25). This symbiosis emerges from the similar structures of digital algorithms and psychical fantasy. Ed Finn describes algorithms as "encod[ing] a particular kind of abstraction, the abstraction of the desire for an answer" (25), matching the impetus of fantasy, in seeking to provide an answer to the Other's desire. As Lacan argues in his seminar on fantasy, fantasy does not proceed by powers of imagination, but rather logically. Fantasy finds its perfect vehicle in the algorithmic era, unleashing a fantasmatic plague upon intersubjectivity.

In the opening pages of *Sympathy*, Alice conceives of Google as the "reassuring, impersonal, objective… arbiter of truth," and notes that she has "no reason to mistrust

the medium" (21). Google does not only determine reality for Alice, but also lures her toward an encounter with the real. In a study of cyberchondria, Ryen W. White and Eric Horvitz outline Google's capacity to fuel "escalation" or "self-sustaining anxiety-driven click-throughs" (23:28) when users seek answers for medical symptoms. As an example of this phenomenon, Alice begins to fear that she is infertile during a post-college period of excessive internet activity. She performs an "online self-diagnosis" which leads her to decide she has "polycystic ovaries and total sterility" (40). During this time, Alice's pornography habits also exhibit escalation through the search engine. She becomes obsessed with actor Maria Ozawa, whose starring role in a particular production company lures her increasingly into "videos which simulated rape, torture, and bondage" (39). Part of this tendency toward escalation depends on how "there's no end to things, no way out" (233) to search. There is no final scene to its images like in a movie. It is these forms of escalation through the search engine that then later structure Alice's relation with Mizuko. Though Alice initially assigns neutrality to Google, she gradually begins to suspect "some sinister controller behind it all" (87) whose desires she is "enslaved by as much as Mizuko" (335). Her desire is the desire of Google. As much as she searches, she is searched for in turn: "I'd searched [Mizuko's] name enough times… that anything to do with her would seek me out without my soliciting it" (404). Despite the abundance of things to look at online, Google often produces visual fixation more than diversification.

The association between Google and the real in *Sympathy* is underscored by the characters' preoccupation with Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which has recently gone missing in the novel's timeline. Along with Alice's "compulsive interest in the case," her boyfriend Dwight is kept awake at night by how the signals from the flight's black box are growing fainter every day (121-2). More than the flight itself, *Sympathy*'s characters are drawn towards this black box, which is "about the size of a shoebox, weigh[ing] around 19 kilograms, and is actually orange," so as to be "easier to find" (357). Much like the lost wreck of the Titanic discussed by Žižek, this black box constitutes "a sublime object: a positive, material object [socially] elevated to the status of the impossible Thing" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 77). Its status as unlocatable causes a collective anxiety for the characters, in whose world everything appears geolocatable and retrievable due to search engines. On a long drive into the country, Alice and Dwight are led by the voice of Google Maps, along with googling everything that they pass by (195-6). More

significantly, Alice employs the lens of Google Earth to experience visual omnipotence, as she pans over the city and speculates on the movements of others. In one of Alice's visual journeys, she moves "down and down until [she] landed on the blades of grass and the goose dung and the dew" of a New York park (400-1). Her visual movement here replicates the opening shot to *Blue Velvet* (Lynch 1986) when the camera drifts from an idyllic neighbourhood scene to the insect-ridden soil. Žižek writes that this shot displays the ontology of Lynch, a "contrast between reality, observed from a safe distance, and the absolute proximity of the real" ("The Lamella of David Lynch" 206). Like how Lynch's camera is steadily lured from the "establishing shot of reality" to "the disgusting substance of enjoyment, the crawling and twinkling of indestructible life" ("Lamella" 206), Alice's zooming in is driven toward uncovering what lies behind the digital screen of reality, through the points of indeterminacy in the image.

When these visual failures occur as disruptive events, they are traumatic for Alice, and only further escalate her searching. For example, Mizuko disappears at one point from the internet, causing Alice to achingly search the internet, settling momentarily on "look[ing] at the routes… on Google Maps" that Mizuko might be walking, "to create pictures in [her] mind of what she was up to" (332). Yet, Mizuko's absence is too much, causing Alice to begin to text her repetitively the same message, "WHERE ARE YOU" (332-3), to no reply. Alice is "*ghosted*" (342) by Mizuko, with the spectral reference suggestive of how the increased representation of subjects coincides with the subject's increased capacity to disappear off the face of the Earth, like the missing flight.

As quickly as Mizuko vanishes from Alice's life, she just as quickly appears into it, becoming connected to Alice through the newly fashioned relations of digital search. A techie wannabe, Dwight introduces Alice to an application headed by former Google employees who update the "low tech… original tool of connection" (185) of the family-tree into "a social network" with its main attraction involving "finding out which other users of the service you might be related to" (185). Dwight describes it as "a different kind of search," to which another character replies: "a body search" (186). With this platform, search shifts its focus from the user's external world, and turns inward into the user's body, which is turned inside out so that the user's insides now form part of a social network. This platform connects Alice to Mizuko in the form of a DNA match. Alice believes it is fate due to the genetic connection paralleling a similarity between the pair's life stories (both are mixed race with missing fathers) as obtained through Google: "a

mysterious power had drawn her towards me… I had found myself, or the self that I would like to be… I saw it as evidence of the hidden connections between things, an all-powerful algorithm that sifted through chaos, singling out soulmates" (194). Alice treasures what she has found so much that when her boyfriend expresses curiosity regarding what she is doing, she hides her screen and quickly deletes the search history (194).

The connection of Alice to Mizuko is not a random occurrence, but rather emblematic of the social bond of digital search. As alluded to in the previous chapter, Benjamin Bratton writes how digital platforms like Google orientate themselves toward "universal deep address" (205) in which everything and everyone in the world exists to end up in a computer, creating "a space of *relationality* between things that exceeds the relations they might already possess as natural objects" (205). The unseen connections that deep search produces are also the commodities of digital capitalism, as the characters of *Sympathy* note the exorbitant cost of the body search app (186). It is in the negative space of Alice's lack of stable relations with others, her loneliness and alienation in New York, her detachment from her family, Dwight's known infidelity on a threesome-seeking app, that her fantasmatic relation with Mizuko arises. Žižek indirectly diagnoses Alice when he contends that "it is perhaps this very growing disenchantment with our actual social world [that] accounts for the fascination exerted by cyberspace" as the place where "the mysterious domain of phantasmic Otherness opens up, as if the screen of the interface is today's version of the blank, of the unknown region" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 207). Dulled by her everyday relations, the internet offers Alice enchantment, a relation to an enigma, even if it is only a lure.

Rationalizing her intense attachment to Mizuko, Alice aligns her social media relation with an ontological theory of relation, believing that Mizuko possesses a "symmetrical soul" (212) to her own, appearing like "some glitch in which I could see myself in another universe" (246). Conversing with Mizuko about the Higgs boson, Alice endorses the theory of "supersymmetry" which "predicts a partner particle for each particle that we know exists" (291-2), a mode of relation inscribed into the very texture of the universe. Alice's faith in symmetry stands against the opposing theory of the multiverse, in which there are "lots of little universes separated by invisible screens" (292). The Lacanian perspective lies somewhere between these two theories. It is the misrecognition of symmetry in the mirror phase that opens the window onto sociality, in

viewing others as the *semblables* of the subject's mirror image. While the invisible screens of the multiverse might sound Lacanian, Alenka Zupančič points out that Lacan's theory of intersubjectivity does not posit a "non-totalizable multiplicity of singularities" and "elementary particles" (26). This vision of the social accords both with the multiverse theory, as well as the ideology of digital capitalism. For Lacan, subjects are not split from others by an invisible screen, but rather are themselves a screen, negotiating with the Other's gaze.

"Psychoanalyzing" Alice's belief in supersymmetry, Mizuko argues that she is "projecting" (292) onto physics her own internal conflicts. Looking at Mikuzo, she projects differently. Excavating Alice's internal conflicts by playing analyst, she attempts "to make [Alice] cry" (292) as part of her dacryphilia (a fetish for tears). Successful in her endeavour, Mizuko snaps a Polaroid of the artificially sobbing Alice, freezing the tear's appearance. In this action, Mizuko displays her own approach to the screen. As Alice explains, Mizuko "liked to see people crying, and to comfort them," which "genuinely turned [her] on… know[ing] they were in an emotional state of some kind" (134). She herself "rarely cried" as "sadness usually made her hard… impenetrable" (134). Mizuko's dacryphilia relates to the novel's title. Writing about sympathy, Eugenie Brinkema points to Adam Smith's "problematic of sentiment as part of the larger dilemma of existing in a world with different beings who, ultimately, are opaque to us" (6). Brinkema outlines Smith's solution of "sympathy… not requir[ing] a one-to-one correspondence between the experience another is undergoing and our own impressions," but rather "feel[ing] for the other in the absence of their (appropriate) feeling" (7). Smith's version of sympathetic intersubjectivity "explicitly invokes imaginary embodiment, even entry and bodily boundary dissolution" so much so that "a subject can become in some way the same person as another" (8). Conversely, Mizuko's dacryphilia does not seek to eliminate the gap between herself and Alice, but rather enjoys employing another's face as a screen by which to project Mizuko's own emotions back to her. She cries through Alice, and the tears produced are embodiments of her object *a*, which she immediately freezes in in their emergence with her Polaroid. The tears of another are a narcissistic object for Mizuko, just as they are for Alice: "a single tear slid down [Mizuko's] face. I wondered, weird to lick it? Yes. Don't lick" (258). While Alice wants to ingest Mizuko, Mizuko wants to be cried out by Alice. Each conceives of the other as a screen through which their object *a* appears.

Nevertheless, object *a* cannot be fully externalized, for it is internal as well. Žižek describes it as a "parasitical object [that] incessantly changes its form" due to its "*anamorphic* status" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 86). In being a subject of the signifier, the subject exists in a parasitical relation within the Other as host, as well as being parasitized by the Other, their own body becoming a host for signifiers. In Sean Braune's study of the parasite, he articulates how "an invasive language-parasite enters the subject-of from the outside and constructs that outside as an 'outside'" so that the "incursions of the symbolic order as exteriority affect the overall functionality and stability of the imaginarily coherent 'subject'" (62). Like the Möbius strip, the parasite figures the subject's relation with the Other: an externality becomes internal—with the parasite's entrance into the subject's body—and an internality becomes external—when the parasite re-emerges, like in slips of the tongue. Such is "the strange looping path" (5) captured by an X-ray of the parasite that Mizuko's brain becomes infected with during her relations with Alice: "*a ribbon*" measuring "*two centimetres*" and first spotted by doctors as "*a strange ringlike thing*" (357). Initially, Alice approaches Mizuko's parasite through the screen of search, "search[ing] *self-infected parasite*" (345) due to her suspicion of the lengths Mizuko will go to for a good story. Eventually, Alice fantasizes of herself as the parasite, "imagin[ing] burrowing into her, eating my way all the way up into her brain" (356), a metaphorical representation of her digital search efforts. Despite these efforts to assume or assign responsibility for the parasite, it belongs neither to Alice nor Mizuko, but rather signals the by-product of the subject and the Other's interactions. Through its affliction of encephalitis, the parasite causes memory loss in Mizuko, deleting all the time she and Alice spent together. The real of their relationship, represented by the parasite, annihilates their imaginary entanglement.

Ultimately, Alice and Mizuko only achieve a symmetrical relationship through mutual parasitic infection. Feeling ill at one point, Alice suspects herself of being infected with a "tapeworm" (294) and coming down with "a sympathetic form of encephalitis" (336) to Mizuko's. Yet, her parasite is singular to her, existing not in her brain, but in her womb. This parasite bears an absent cause as well: "how had it happened" (304)? After "something moved inside [Alice's] stomach… the flick of a fish tail" (295), she thinks of how the stomachs of female salmon "disintegrated inside them to make more room for eggs" (298). Despite being "the size of an egg" (304) when Alice visits Planned Parenthood, and therefore requiring a surgical abortion, it is as non-specular as Mizuko's

parasite. Given “a scan of [her] womb, captioned with the time and date… on smooth photo paper,” Alice relates that she “couldn’t see anything, though [she] searched and searched” (304). Even when the parasite emerges in a flood of blood as if by its own volition, exiting “a matter of hours” before Alice was to have it surgically “suctioned out” (327), it appears as a screen:

> I turned to face the toilet bowl and knelt down to look at what was inside. The blood was clotted and dark at the bottom but sending up red billows like a flare that was turning all the water pink and opaque so that it became rapidly more difficult to see what was in there… I searched for images of miscarriage online—kneeling by the toilet, gripping the ceramic with my free hand in order to try to stop my shaking—and then used the toothbrush holder to scoop out the pink water and transfer it carefully into the sink with the plug down. I worked meticulously and calmly, using my hands as a sieve, until I found what I was looking for. (325)

Afterwards, she describes what she has found, the search result at the bottom of the toilet bowl, as “the tiny, fleshy part of me I had saved… the rich red sashimi I had salvaged” which “as [she] held it, it appeared to move, then to shrink and curl up at the edges like one of those fortune fish” (326-7). She “looked for bones [but] couldn’t see anything remotely human, and yet [she] felt a kind of kinship [she] had never felt before” (327). Cradling its form, “it became increasingly leathery and indestructible-looking” (327). Finally, Alice seals it in an envelope to dispose of it, yet cannot bring herself to, keeping it in this sealed envelope addressed to no one.

What Alice finds bears a strong resemblance to Lacan’s myth of the lamella, described by Richard Boothby as “a part of oneself that has become alien” (64). The lamella emerges from Lacan’s challenge to Aristophanes’ theory of love alluded to in this chapter’s previous section. As noted there, Lacan defines “the search by the subject” as not being oriented toward “the sexual complement, but [rather] the part of himself, lost forever” (*Seminar XI* 205), which Lacan elaborates through the lamella, a “false organ” (196) representing “indestructible life” (198), an enigmatic kin-object to the human subject. Like how Alice slides along the screen of Mizuko, Lacan describes “the lamella [as] something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba” (197). As opposed to the digital fantasies that Alice develops of Mizuko as her object of desire, Boothby writes how the lamella “is real precisely by virtue of not being figured in the imaginary” (64). The lamella is a by-product of the subject’s encounter with the Other, a leftover which “is nevertheless active and seeking” (Boothby 64). It is what is in the human but is not

human, a desire which orientates itself toward an inhuman object. Though search engines turn the subject toward the positivity of digital content, this content can never fully feed the lamella. Just as both Joe and Alice pursue every backdoor possible into their objects of obsession, the lamella "goes everywhere," "run[s] around" (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 197), and "can slip under doors" (Lacan, *Écrits* 717). Given the adaptability of the lamella, Lacan suggests that "the only solution would be to lock it up, placing it in the jaws of [an enclosed] sphere" but the lamella" would "have to slip into the sphere, and would have to do so by itself" (*Écrits* 719). The internet represents perhaps the first social relocation of the lamella into an enclosed environment, giving it infinite space to roam along the digital screen, but as suggested by its eruption from within Alice, the search engines of the internet ultimately fail to satisfy the lamella.

Whither Gender

Looking at this chapter's two novels together, an interesting discrepancy arises in that both feature narratives of digital obsession with a woman, but the narrator of *You* is a man, while the narrator of *Sympathy* is a woman. Despite this discrepancy, the two narrators desire similarly. Viewed through a Lacanian framework, they both desire and fantasize in a masculine way, pursuing the other as object *a*. As Clint Burnham and Matthew Flisfeder explain, "the masculine subject… relates to the *objet petit a*" which is "the object-cause of desire," through a fantasy in which "there is something in the Woman, the little bit of the Real, which 'is in [her] but is more than [her]'" (142). In both *You* and *Sympathy*, the narrators project this excess into their loved objects through Google: there is something in this person more than what Google shows me. Burnham and Flisfeder expand that masculine desire represents "an essentially masturbatory fantasy" (142) since it has no human partner, fitting with how the most common sexual scene in both novels is masturbation, often with the help of the digital screen. For both subjects, the Woman that they are looking for does not exist, being an effect of the screen rather than a warm body.

Alternatively, to complicate matters, are Joe and Alice both feminine subjects? In Andrea Long Chu's analysis of digital scopophilia, she stresses the libidinal attraction of the screen over the libidinal attraction of the image. Looking specifically at internet pornography, she writes how its images often display "sex acted out between the commanding men and the degraded women onscreen," but what is more significant is

“the sex unfolding between the addictive pornographic image and the essentially female viewer it dominates” (*Females* 68). Clarifying matters, Long Chu describes this viewing as sex with the “screen” (69) rather than with a gendered partner. In Long Chu’s estimation, this inhuman partner “feminizes” (68) the viewer, who submits masochistically to the screen’s power over them. Despite Joe and Beck performing dominant-submissive role-play with stereotypical gender roles in *You*, this occasional role-play pales compared to Joe’s submissive relation to the digital screen. It should be noted that Long Chu’s more overarching polemic against the gender binary is that “femaleness is a universal sex defined by self-negation” (11), one that increasingly takes place—given the personal examples Long Chu deploys involving YouTube make-up tutorials and Tumblr “sissy” porn—in a digital setting.

Looking at Joe and Alice, the poles of gender blur to the extent that gender begins to fail as a heuristic for understanding their respective subjectivities. Burnham and Flisfeder argue that “gender is the name we give to how we relate to (or do not relate to) the other” so that “gender, or the sexual relationship, is our fundamental antagonism” (139). This argument applies to *You*. Even if Joe can be read as a feminized subject due to his subjection to the screen, he asserts a stereotypical, dominant masculinity toward Beck as a mode of defence against this femininity. But it is more difficult to see how gender represents the fundamental antagonism of *Sympathy*, whose conflict seems to be generated more so by the digital screen, in which the internet becomes the name we give to how we relate to (or do not relate) to the other. This potential negation of the social centrality of gender via the internet connects with Žižek’s anxious question of “what if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity, so that once sexual difference is abolished [by the internet], a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine?” (“No Sex, Please, We’re Posthuman” n.p.). Mary Harrod writes that Žižek’s position suggests a fear that “sexuality, when mediated by technology, paradoxically loses its transcendent power” (96) and “erotic desire [becomes] entirely synonymous with nihilistic self-obliteration” (94) or “masochistic self-negation” (97). Alice suggests as much when she concludes that her libidinal “connection [with Mizuko] had led to the opposite of intimacy. [Her] search had led to its opposite. [She] had never felt so isolated and disconnected, even from [herself]” (370). And yet, she continues to search at the novel’s close for Mizuko, automatically, like a machine. While Harrod contends that post-

gender identities in a time of digital mediation can—contra Žižek's position—be viewed as "a source of liberating potential" (97), *Sympathy* suggests that post-gender identities be viewed instead through their potential for new forms of antagonism rather than liberation, ones still haunted but not dominated by gender. Regardless of their gender status, both narrators still search for a Woman as a figure of alterity. Looking ahead to the next chapter, a specter is haunting the internet, the specter of gender.

To clarify, the internet is not haunted by the disappearance of gendered relations, but rather by the pre-existing failure of gendered relations, a negative space in which a thousand relations can bloom. Against the perspective of characters like Joe, digital platforms do not disintegrate the bond between men and women, but rather resemble Alenka Zupančič's description of how "power—and particularly modern forms of power—works by first appropriating a fundamental negativity of the symbolic order, its constitutive non-relation, while building it into a narrative of a higher Relation," thereby enacting a "privatization of the negative" (31). With the ethos of connecting people, digital platforms exploit the non-relation through the mediatory space provided by the digital screen, producing the dominant mode of relating to others today. As Robert Kilroy writes, the real of the non-relation does not disappear in the digital era, but rather "becomes integrated into the system" of digital capitalism "as its driving force" (15). Nevertheless, the two novels discussed in this chapter show that far from a remedy, platforms like Google ultimately fail as a strategy of containment of the non-relation, which returns in more traumatic forms for the previously sheltered subjects.

Chapter 3

Searching for Ghosts: Digital Death in *Unfriended*, *Personal Shopper*, and *Searching*

Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska define "*mediation* [as] *a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world*" (xv). Though Kember and Zylinska acknowledge that "our entanglement with nonhuman entities continues to intensify with the ever more corporeal, ever more intimate dispersal of media and technologies into our biological and social lives" (xv), their more central argument is that mediation is inescapable: "*we have always been mediated*" (18). With mediation being conceived broadly, Kember and Zylinska's "theory of 'mediation' [is] also a 'theory of life'" (xv), in which life does not solely belong to the human subject, but also the media that this subject interacts with, producing what they call "the *lifeness* of media" (xvii). It is through this alignment of mediation with life that Kember and Zylinska ultimately propose "an ethics of lifeness" in which "responsible decisions about life, made from amid life itself, [must] focus on the conservation of life" and its "generative potential" (171-2), which now necessarily flows through digital channels. For Kember and Zylinska, "such a materialist positioning of life as both form and process aims to foreground life's immanent, productive dynamism" (160). Ultimately, Zylinska and Kember propose that an ethics of mediation must originate from within the flows of mediation rather than from some speculative position outside mediation, since in their theory, there is no outside to mediation.

This chapter approaches mediation as primarily a political and historical question, contra Kember and Zylinska's predominant framing of mediation as ontological. To shift this framing, the chapter turns Kember and Zylinska's methodology on its head, proposing instead a theory of death after new media, in which ethics emerges not from a consideration of life and how it is mediated today, but from a consideration of death and how it is mediated today. Jacques Derrida argues that the primary ethical question of how "to live… is not learned from life, taught by life" but rather taught "by death," since the question "has no sense… unless it comes to terms with death… mine as (well as) that of the other" (*Specters of Marx* xvii). While death is not addressed in *Life after New Media*, this chapter focuses on death as it is mediated by digital platforms, arguing that

this mediation is not orientated as Kember and Zylinska contend toward "remold[ing] and repackag[ing]… 'life itself' into a product" (163), but rather repackaging death, which constitutes one of the most powerful limits to the mediation of digital capitalism. As John Durham Peters diagnoses the digital era, "nothing is so veiled to us as death, nothing is so telling of our own times as our inability to mourn" in which "we lack the cultural and religious practices that would protect us from being lonely psychological agents," with "our perfunctory grief bespeak[ing] a disturbance in that most crucial of all relationships, our relation to the dead" (147-8). Pointing to a media system through which subjects can remain as spectral presences long after they are gone, Durham Peters suggests that death comes to appear "less final" (148). The internet represents the apotheosis of this trend, as suggested by the proliferation of cultural fantasies of death's overcoming through digital means, such as the *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" (Harris 2013) and the Amazon Prime television series *Upload* (2020-1). Then there are the actual attempts of platforms like Google to reincarnate the dead from their digital records (Brown n.p.), potentially allowing one to converse with the simulation of a deceased individual via Google Home (Holley n.p.).

To quote singer-songwriter Phil Elvrum of Mount Eerie, "death is real / someone's there and then they're not / and it's not for singing about / it's not for making into art" ("Real Death"). Despite this realness, death's social mediation is historically and culturally specific, as argued by Derrida. Through the shifting figure of the specter, Derrida reads the cultural and technological conditions that mediate the appearance of ghosts, figuring the "nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx qtd. in Derrida 134) that the past hands down to the present. For Derrida, the specter signals an uncanny supplement or ethereal by-product of mediation, one with political resonances. The specter is not immanent to mediation but rather signals the outside to mediation, in the form of what Derrida calls a "disappearing apparition" (125). In Slavoj Žižek's commentary on *Specters*, he writes that "*what the spectre conceals is* [reality's] *'primordially repressed', the irrepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded*" ("The Spectre of Ideology" 13-4). It is an invisible externality that is folded into the internal mediation of the social, and it is only in manipulating this externality that the internal system of mediation can be altered. In other words, mediation runs on that which cannot be mediated, rather than constituting a complete system.

Following an introductory section, this chapter turns to three films—*Unfriended* (Gabriadze 2014), *Personal Shopper* (Assayas 2016) and *Searching* (Chaganty 2018)—that conjure the specter of digital mediation, a system of mediation structured by platforms like Google. Each of these films feature haunted media, in which the specter makes its presence felt through the digital interface. Integral to this chapter's argument, Jeffrey Sconce states that "tales of paranormal media are important… not as timeless expressions of some undying electronic superstition, but as a permeable language in which to express a culture's changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies" (*Haunted Media* 10). Ghosts provide a lens by which to analyze a culture's desires and fears in relation to technology. Reading the ghosts imagined by these films, the chapter follows Derrida's contention that to historicize mediation is to analyze its "different modality, [its] different modus of phantoms" (Derrida qtd. in Mazin n.p.). In Fredric Jameson's commentary on *Specters of Marx*, he lays out what will be the central methodology of this chapter, involving identifying in "the virtualities of the new communications technologies… new ghosts [that] now seem on the point of walking" (*Valences of the Dialectic* 180). Yet, in the digital age, this task becomes more difficult. As Derrida warns, the internet's "possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ever… from opposing… the living to the living-dead of its ghosts" (*Specters* 212) threatens to render the specter banal, robbing it of its disruptive potential.

The digital gentrification of the spectral can be marked by the popular slang of ghosting to describe how individuals today can appear and then vanish into the virtuality of the internet. In an interview, author Patricia Lockwood attests that "what's so attractive about the internet" is that "you can exist there as a spirit in the void" (Freeman n.p.) In a society of ghosts, there can be no specter as that which reinscribes the traumatic gap between the living and the dead. Therefore, there can be no learning from the dead for the living, no assuming responsibility for the absent dead. While Kember and Zylinska identify life as "a basic condition for the existence of the human" (172), this chapter follows Sadeq Rahimi and Byron J. Good's contention that "being haunted and living with ghosts too need to be re-cognized as core elements of being human" (410). Elaborating, they write how "it is this reading of the subject as always already haunted that best allows a comprehension of humans as social subjects not only of power and meaning, but also of history and (collective) desire in time" (410). This chapter analyzes

the specific way in which subjects are haunted today, as well as how the digital platforms of late capitalism allow the subject to block this haunting from the subject's knowledge, mediating it into more pleasurable experiences, and lending the impression that anything can be mediated. Alert to the unprecedented manner by which "politico-economic hegemony… passes by way of techno-mediatic power" in late capitalism, Derrida argues that capitalism "cannot be analyzed… without taking into account so many spectral effects, the new speed of apparition… of the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image, and the virtual event, cyberspace and surveillance… that today deploy unheard-of powers" (*Specters* 66-7). He questions whether "Marx and his heirs [help] us to think and to treat this phenomenon," suggesting that Marxism will be "reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary" (67). The introduction to this chapter delves into this question, through illuminating a theoretical modification to one of Marx's heirs (Jameson) by Alexander Galloway, one that frames mediation as primarily political and historical.

Galloway begins his work *The Interface Effect* (2012) in Jamesonian fashion, by stating that "*digital media ask a question to which the political interpretation is the only coherent answer*" viii). Galloway frames his project as an "attempt to migrate Jameson's methodology slightly in the direction of new media, as any amount of historical specificity today would demand" (*The Interface Effect* viii). Amid Galloway's transport of Jameson into the field of media theory, Jameson's fundamental Marxist code, the mode of production, mutates, becoming the mode of mediation. Initially, Galloway writes how *The Interface Effect* aims at "the deep history of media as modes of mediation" (15). Yet, Galloway's aim expands by the arrival of his next project *Excommunication* (2013), co-written with Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark. In Galloway's single-authored chapter, he writes more strongly how "history may be understood as the organization of mediation… that, at the same time, invents mediation" ("Love of the Middle" 54). Shifting from the plane of media history to history itself, modes of mediation function at a conceptual level similar to the modes of production in Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Therein, Jameson gives an alternate but redolent description of how "every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of several modes of production all at once" (80). Avoiding charges of determinism, Jameson clarifies that multiple modes or production

are organized—or more accurately, disorganized, and needing interpretive elucidation—in any given cultural text.

The collection of these mediatory modes into a temporary assemblage generates what Derrida calls a "spectral effect" (*Specters* 67), due to the necessary mixing of temporalities. The specter marks the "*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*" (xviii), destabilizing contemporary society's well-defended borders between the past, present, and future. Crucially, Jameson's original theory provides a model by which this assemblage's internal conflicts can signal a revolutionary trajectory within a cultural object, namely "that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life" (81). For Jameson, it is then the "task of cultural and social analysis" to rewrite the cultural text in which these contradictory dynamics are contained within "the deeper and more permanent constitutive structure in which the empirical textual objects know intelligibility" (83), meaning the history of modes of production. For Galloway, the aim is the same, but the underlying code of the story is changed—from a narrative of production to mediation. If, as Galloway summarizes Jameson elsewhere, Marxist "historicity means thinking the mode of production" ("History Is What Hurts" 136), then Galloway's modification involves first thinking the mode of mediation. The conceptual shift from mode of production to mode of mediation is not one of rupture, but rather that to access Marxism in the digital era, one must pass through Galloway's updating of Jameson.

Derrida's specter is usefully a figure split between mediation and production, acting as a bridge between Galloway and Jameson's versions of historicism. Gesturing to the longstanding relationship between media and the supernatural, Durham Peters declares that "every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts" (141). Yet, this statement veers closely toward a media determinism of the ghostly. Moving indirectly against this media determinism, Derrida writes of the "techno-tele-media apparatuses [whose] new rhythms of information and communication… *produce* [specters]: (both invent *and* bring up to date, inaugurate *and* reveal, cause to come about *and* bring up to light *at the same time, there where they were already there without being there*: it is the relation of the concept of *production* to the ghost that is in question here" (*Specters* 98). These ghosts compel both a media theory reading as well as a political reading. Just as the text operates as an allegorical device for Jameson, and the

interface similarly for Galloway, so too does the specter for Derrida, as per Jameson. Akin to the circuitousness of "allegory [being] an allegory of itself," Jameson contends that Derrida's "very concept of ghostliness produces ghosts" since "to deplore the eclipse of the past is already in ways we cannot yet fathom to have recovered that very past whose extinction we register" (*Valences* 147). What seems circuitous still bears a political orientation. Like his own methodology in *The Political Unconscious,* Jameson identifies Derrida's figures of the spectral trace or gap as spatial metaphors to be read "in the direction of time" (*Valences 1*47). So too then does this chapter, reading the films as markers of the historical status of spectrality.

Providing justification for this chapter's turn to film to analyze spectrality, Béla Balázs states: "what is certain is that no written or oral literature is able to express the ghostly, the demonic and the supernatural as well as the cinema" (59). Years later, this idea finds an echo in Derrida's cameo in *Ghost Dance* (McMullen 1983) where he says: "cinema is an art of phantoms (*phantomachia*), a battle of phantoms. I think that's what the cinema's about, when it's not boring. It's the art of letting ghosts come back." Moving to the internet, a different sort of relationship to the specter emerges. Sconce contends that by contrast to "the long and productive alliance between ghosts and celluloid… ghosts [are] allergic to the digital era… resist[ing] all efforts to be transformed into binary code and stored on a chip" ("Haunted Viewers" 291-2). By aligning the spectral purely with celluloid, Sconce engages in a different sort of media determinism of ghosts, involving not how the digital uniquely produces ghosts (like cinema), but how the digital uniquely negates them. This chapter reads Sconce's position not so much as truth, but as a challenge to identify the unique modality of phantoms belonging to the digital era. At this point, it is important to remember that Derrida's figure of spectrality emerges from its very "repression" or mediation, which paradoxically becomes "the confirmation of a haunting" (*Specters of Marx* 46). If the digital represses the specter to a degree unlike any other media, then the haunting will be more powerful.

In light of the films of this chapter aligning to different extents with the horror genre, it is useful to consult Robin Wood's point that the "true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression" (28). Though influential, Wood's definition of horror has been criticized by

Stephen Prince for “privileg[ing] psychological agents of causation” in the Freudian style (120). Operating between these two positions, the characters of this chapter’s films repress—the psychical form of mediation—the horror of death into media, particularly *into* the digital screen. The characters search the internet for ways to mediate the horror of death, attempting to lose the horror inside the internet, rather than find it. Abetted by digital media, they attempt to keep death at a distance, by folding it into the internet. Their failures to successfully mediate death signal the limits of the dominant mode of mediation, a limit from which other modes of mediation might begin.

The Screen Inside the Screen

According to Zara Dinnen, “new media appears as everyday, rote,” concealing “the ways in which new media estranges us from or brings us closer to ourselves, each other, and the nonhuman” (75). Adding to Dinnen’s list, this section considers the ways in which digital mediation simultaneously estranges us from and brings us closer to death. Moreover, this section challenges Dinnen’s framing of mediation—indebted to Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska—as being a “present, ongoing, unresolving condition” (156). Like Kember and Zylinska, this understanding of mediation as ontological leads to a modest political stance: “this book cannot offer a radical break from or destruction of the political conditions it describes—it is no manifesto and finds no real ‘outside’ or future to turn to,” instead concentrating on “making ways to live from within” (18). This section focuses on ways of living in relation to the invisibility of the dead. While Dinnen aims to transport the invisible into the terrain of the visible, “making visible the digital banal, the mode by which we don’t see the digital conditions of everyday life” (18), Derrida aims to transport the visible into the terrain of the invisible, that of the specter. For Derrida, this aim involves an absence of sight, reliant upon the figure of “the specter [as] what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects—on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see… all phantasms are projected onto the screen of this ghost… that is, on something absent” (*Specters of Marx* 123, 125). Contrary to the proliferation of material screens central to digital mediation, Derrida posits instead a “phantomatic” screen that is without a material “‘screenic’ support” (123), by which the specter is encountered, or through which it visits. Encountering what is invisible to the subject rather than what is visible demonstrates the limits to the mode of mediation. This invisibility is concealed by the specular playground

of the internet, with the invisible screen which Derrida speaks about being obscured by the ubiquity of the digital screen.

Being set entirely within the digital screen of the protagonist's laptop, the novelty of *Unfriended* is how it brings the invisible screen and the digital screen into proximity, rather than allow the digital screen to repress the invisible screen into its unfathomable depths. A supernatural horror movie that refuses to show any ghost (up until its final moment), *Unfriended* depicts characters being manipulated to their deaths by an invisible force, working from within their digital screens. The characters attempt to bury this invisible force within the digital screen. They collectively repress into the internet an act of cyberbullying committed in the past that resulted in the death of a friend. While Dinnen suggests that there exists a problem of false consciousness within digital mediation, with her book intervening into how "we don't notice the affective novelty of becoming-with digital media" and how we are "unaware of the ways we are co-constituted as subjects with media" (1), *Unfriended* features subjects who are not blinded by digital mediation, but rather deploying its affordances to their advantage. It is not the subject's involvement with digital media that is unconscious; instead, digital media are employed by the subject to manage the unconscious. The dilemma of Dinnen's project involves "the processes of effacement that obscure and block the mediational conditions of contemporary life from view" (126); the dilemma of *Unfriended* involves subjects—with the help of digital media—who are blocking a violent act from the view of others. Not so much entangled with media and others in a mediational condition, these characters wish to disentangle themselves from others through the cut of the digital screen, specifically from dead others. They do not experience "mediation as becoming-with" (Dinnen 90), but rather as becoming-without, in which their responsibility to others and to the dead is negated by the digital screen; they are unfriending rather than friending. But the film goes to show that the dead cannot be so easily unfriended.

Unfriended introduces the viewer to its protagonist, high schooler Blaire (Shelley Hennig), through her mediation of the visible and the invisible via the digital screen. Appearing initially as a cursor, Blaire accesses LiveLeak to view "Laura Barns suicide," which shows her former best friend shooting herself in the face. It is the death anniversary of Laura (Heather Sossaman), and Blaire chooses to engage with this memory via the digital screen, keeping it firmly in the terrain of the visible, just as Sigmund Freud argues that the best method of repressing something traumatic is in a

“visual representation” (“Screen Memories” 316). She then follows a link to the YouTube video that caused Laura to kill herself, a recording of an intoxicated Laura embarrassing herself at a party. An edited version of the event, this video is a public screen memory. It is revealed at the end of the film that Blaire edited this YouTube to cut the part involving her turning the camera on herself, showing that she was filming the video: a screen inside the screen. It is this invisible screen within the visible screen which incites the specter of the film, which ultimately brings the two screens into an uneasy alignment.

An incoming Skype call from Blaire’s boyfriend Mitch (Moses Storm) interrupts her viewing, and the cursor frantically leaps around: a digital jump scare. Pausing the YouTube video and closing the LiveLeak window, she accepts the call from Mitch, who asks if she’s “OK,” since she sounds “a little down.” She replies, “no, no, no, I’m great!” Switching on video, she allows herself to become visible under her own terms. She performs a virtual striptease for Mitch, who demands to see more. Utilizing the screen, Blaire mediates what Mitch cannot see to keep him desiring. At Blaire’s command, Mitch becomes more aggressive, suddenly brandishing a knife and ordering her to undress, which she finds “sexy.” Through her mediation of what lies beyond the screen—the invisible—Blaire is in total control of the encounter, a control which she exerts at the visual level, luring Mitch deeper into her, while withholding what he wants by delaying and misdirecting. Though Mitch brandishes a knife at her, she feels invulnerable due to the protective shield of the screen. Like a ghost, he cannot touch her.

Figure 6: Still from *Unfriended*

Challenging Blaire's power of specular mediation, the specter intervenes at this moment, accepting for Mitch and Blaire an invitation into a Skype group call with their friends, just as the strip tease intensifies. They scramble for their clothing, the screen suddenly revealing too much. Privately messaging Mitch, Blaire asks why the call was accepted, and he speculates: "Ghost?" Anxious, Blaire replies "STOP!!!", then erases this text prior to sending, messaging "ya probably" instead. She is not experiencing the "anxiety of mediation" (86) discussed by Zara Dinnen, but rather the anxiety of a lack of mediation. The specter makes its motive explicit in the first message sent to Blaire, via Laura's Facebook account, referencing Blaire's prior viewing of the LiveLeak and YouTube videos: "hey blaire… what you watching?" Depicting the reception of a message from the dead, this scene parallels Derrida's definition of the specter as "a spectral asymmetry [that] interrupts… all specularity" (*Specters of Marx* 6). Blaire responds, "who is this???", and Facebook informs her that the message has been "Seen", but by who or by what? As Derrida clarifies, the spectral effect involves how "we do not see who looks at us" (6). It is not that we do not know *where* the specter's gaze is coming from, but that we do not know *when* the specter's gaze is coming from, as "we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony" (6). In contrast to the privacy or security settings that allow users to control who sees what online, the specter's gaze cannot be blocked.

Fredric Jameson explains that "Derrida's ghosts are these moments in which the present—and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism—unexpectedly betrays us" (*Valences of the Dialectic* 142). Published a year prior to *Specters*, Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992) explicitly aligns capitalism's new world system with digital technology, contending that "the world system of late capitalism [is] inconceivable without the computerized media technology which… faxes an unheard-of simultaneity across its branches" (10). The specter interrupts digital liveness, challenging how the internet increasingly endeavours to bring users into states of shared temporality (e.g. livestreams), thereby mediating temporality itself through the intensification of the present. When the specter of Laura messages Blaire, she disrupts this digital mediation of temporality. Blaire responds by opening her internet history and deleting the record of the LiveLeak video she watched, taking part in the comforting illusion that the past can be deleted with a click.

Blaire believes that whatever is haunting her can be addressed through digital mediation. She googles "Report dead person facebook hacked," but the results have been altered, displaying a website with a message board thread ominously titled "DO NOT ANSWER MESSAGES FROM THE DEAD….". Not answering is just what Blaire intends to do, by unfriending Laura. Indirectly, she refuses the ethical task posited by Derrida of how the living must "*answer for the dead, respond to the dead*… correspond and have it out with… obsessive haunting" (*Specters of Marx* 136). While Blaire wants to mediate the anxiety of the ghost, Derrida proclaims that "anxiety in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary" (135). Blaire turns to the mediation of death offered by platforms like Facebook, in which one can "memorialize" a deceased person's account. Scanned quickly by Blaire, the terms and conditions of this memorialization involve how the account will be locked from entry like a crypt, "frozen" in time, and removed from "public search results." Communication will become unidirectional, with "private messages… still [being] allowed to be sent to the deceased," but the deceased presumably not being allowed to reply. First, Blaire must procure the "proof" of the person's passing, which she googles, finding an article about Laura's death, again among corrupted search results. The article implicates Blaire and her friends' involvement in Laura's death, noting how Laura was a victim of cyberbullying. While condemning herself, Blaire moves forward with her condemning of Laura to what Murray Leeder describes as "the 'undeath' of social media, which now outlasts its users" (227). Her actions recall Derrida's writing of how "*one has to have knowledge*" about where the specter is located, "what place it occupies—for it must stay in its place… in a safe place" where it may "stay… and move no more" (9). This knowledge allows the specter to remain unacknowledged. But the specter of Laura refuses to have their death repressed into an inert Facebook profile.

After Laura escapes from her digital crypt, Blaire and her friends summon all the mediatory means of the digital to return her there. They persist in their belief that her ghost is a digital phenomenon and therefore vulnerable to a digital exorcism. It is either a hacker, a glitch, a virus, or a troll, all of which can be reported, or problem-solved through the digital screen. Mitch's persistent suggestions to Blaire that it might be a ghost are shut down, as "ghost" does not fit within the representational windows of her desktop. This belief in the ghost's digital status becomes obsessional. Near the midpoint of the film, the characters scour their computer hard drives, attempting to locate the

intruder. “Is it searching, guys?” asks computer whiz Ken (Jacob Wysocki), as Blaire’s screen shows an antivirus program Ken has sent her scanning objects (7,590 of them) on her laptop and quarantining a percentage of them as infected. These infected computational objects are then trashed. In a line capturing Blaire’s character, she informs Ken that the trashing is taking so long because she has “a lot in her recycling bin.” Panicking, Blaire screams “there’s a pinwheel,” as the attempted deletion pushes her device to its mechanical limits. Interferences with the digital’s synchronicity, its unparalleled liveness, its production of a shared present, are the primary means by which terror spreads in *Unfriended*, from screens freezing to videos lagging to sites visited in the past popping up suddenly on one’s screen. No CGI ghosts are required for the scares in *Unfriended*, only the collective fear that there exists an outside to the internet’s mediated temporality.

In the film’s most striking death scene, Val’s (Courtney Halverson) body becomes completely frozen in her Skype image, while life moves on around her, her dog barking and her phone vibrating into the picture, an image of Jameson’s pronounced end of temporality, involving both “the reduction to the present and the reduction to the body” (“The End of Temporality” 717). Though Jameson states this reduction is partially caused by “cybernetic technologies of the present” (705), he also specifically touches on the cellphone, inherited by the Skype interface with its telephonic symbols and options. Jameson calls the cellphone the “seeming apotheosis of synchronous immediacy” even though “few technologies are more reliant on mediations of all kinds” (717). Read in this light, Val’s death captures the bone in immediacy’s throat, how its liveliness often relies upon the user’s bodily stasis.

After Blaire’s spinning pinwheel resolves itself and her trash empties, the threat seems to diminish for a moment, prompting Blaire to message Mitch, “for a sec I thought this was real,” to which he replies, “how do you know its not?” Mitch is right; the real returns, but the characters continue to mediate it solely through the digital screen, their attempts becoming increasingly ridiculous. Adam (Will Peltz) waves around a gun, prompting Mitch to ask: “what are you gonna do, shoot through the computer?” The glitches continue, from clicks not working to windows involuntarily being opened, to songs playing without user control. The communicational noise of various media (e.g. a television playing static) has long been a trope in the horror genre, signalling that the realm of the dead are intruding upon the living, but there is something a little different

going on in the computational era. Marc Olivier contends that “the visceral impact of the glitch heightens an anxiety that distinguishes twenty-first-century media horror from predecessors such as *Poltergeist*: not the fear that new media will absorb its user into an incorporeal digisphere, but the dreaded prospect that it cannot. The message of the glitch is that there is no escape from materiality” (267). For Jameson, “the central problem of the constellation called spectrality” consists of the absence of “materialism, its occultation or repression” (*Valences of the Dialectic* 138), and thus the glitch is spectral, in pointing the user back to materiality. This materiality takes on several forms in *Unfriended* from the materiality of the body to what Alexander Galloway calls the Marxist “real matter of history” (“History Is What Hurts” 136).

To look at the body first, the characters of *Unfriended* initially appear at one with the formal cleanliness of the digital screen, each seeming nothing but a vacuous genre stereotype: the alleged virgin, the jock, the funny guy, the dumb blonde. The specter illuminates the layers to these characters, by attacking their carefully polished presentations of themselves online, like posting images of a drunk and sloppy Val to Facebook through the account of Jess (Renee Olstead). Eventually, their two-dimensional existence—presented within the flatness of the screen—is complicated with the violent eviscerations of their bodies, revealing their deep insides. As punishment for attempting to exit the Skype window, Laura possesses them within the window, prompting Jess to stick a curling iron stuck down her throat, Ken to dismember himself with a blender, and Mitch to plunge a kitchen knife into his eye. These grisly ends are foreshadowed by the eerie video glitches in the Skype group chat. The film amplifies Skype’s frequent but typically minor visual glitches due to either bandwidth throttling or the platform’s own bugs in video quality. Before each of the characters meet their violent ends, their images become horrifically distorted, looking ghostly or monstrous due to the material effects of data loss in the Skype transmission. As their dark pasts are dredged up by Laura, these images gain in truth value: “revealing, perhaps, the characters’ twisted true natures” (Leeder 227). Though it may seem otherwise, their base material is not pixels, but the body. The glitches, as eruptions of specular indiscernibility within the high definition of the internet, transmit this truth, disrupting the characters’ digital mirror images and their containment of the bodily real. As N. Katherine Hayles points out, the overlap between organic life and the digital extends back to the origin of the pixel, with “biology provid[ing] [John von Neumann] with clues to build computers, and computers

provid[ing] clues for theoretical biology" until eventually "the massive and resistant materiality of the self-reproducing automaton" of the cell became replicated "as pixels on computer screens" (240). Accordingly, the Skype glitches mark a return of the repressed body into the digital representation.

Figure 7: Still from *Unfriended*

Like a tick of the clock, the computer click offers a continual warding off ceremony of the spectral, by the verification of a shared, constructed temporality. When Blaire receives an email from Laura, Ken tries to walk her through forwarding the email to him so that he can investigate it as an object—so that he can click on it. But there is a glitch. Blaire says, "either I'm going crazy, or there's no forwarding button." Patiently, Ken explains: "it's at the bottom, if you click on, like, 'reply all.'" Eventually, Ken's patience evaporates: "Oh my God, Blaire, do you know how to use a fucking computer?" Emphasizing the click's significance, Benjamin Bratton writes that for the computer's "interfacial regime" to remain "systematic, clicks must work and do what they promise" (221). If the clicks fail, then digital mediation fails, and the specter appears. The glitch challenges what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun calls the "mapping subjects" produced by the internet, in which the user's clicking around the internet provides "the means by which we 'figure out' power and our relation to a larger social entity" (*Programmed Visions* 69). As Chun elaborates in her critique of the clicking interface, it locks the user into "a situation in which [they] produce [cognitive maps]—or at the very least approximations of them—all the time, in which the founding gesture of ideology critique is simulated by

something that also pleasurably mimics ideology" (71). Galloway likens the "cognitive map" to the "act of reading" and thus the "unreadability" (Manon & Temkin 6) generated by *Unfriended*'s various glitches interfere with the mapping regime of the internet. Imprisoned within her computer screen, Blaire falsely believes she can escape from the inside out.

Figure 8: Still from *Unfriended*

Realizing her doom near the film's end, Blaire's name realizes itself as a callback to *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez 1999). The windows of all her friends now collapsed due to their deaths, Blaire is left alone with her own webcam image, now expanded to almost the totality of her computer's screen. This final image of Blaire cites the self-recording of Heather (Heather Donahue) near the end of *The Blair Witch Project* when she turns the camera on herself to confess her sins. Stripped of her powers of mediation, Blaire's eyes are red with tears and snot drips from her nostrils, evoking a similar return of the bodily real as *The Blair Witch Project*. Yet, these signs of life are balanced by Blaire's pale appearance, lit now only by the blue glow emanating from the screen. She appears spectral since she is spectral. Using the digital screen, Blaire usurps what Derrida calls the specter's "power to see without being seen" (8), viewing Laura's death privately while avoiding the public recognition of her involvement in that

death.[10] As her final act, Laura lets the public see Blaire, uploading to Facebook the YouTube video that Blaire watches at the beginning of *Unfriended*. The video is now uncut, showing that it was Blaire that was behind the camera, behind the screen of the video, revealing the screen inside the screen. At the level of the social, *Unfriended* critiques the user's attempted usurpation of this power of the specter—the subject's positioning of themselves within the terrain of the invisible—one that renders all digital users spectral to some degree. The specter does not pursue Blaire, but rather rests behind her digital screen for the entire film. In the conclusion to the film, spectral hands close the screen of Blaire's laptop, and a ghost leaps toward Blaire from behind the screen. Appearing momentarily, the ghost arrives in the form of a cinematic screen behind the digital screen, another screen inside the screen. This structure through which the specter arrives signals something about digital mediation, that its strength resides in the cinematic editing of life and death made possible through the internet. The nightmare of *Unfriended* begins when this mediation unravels in the face of what it attempts to repress.

We Are All Spiritual Mediums in Digital Capitalism

Unfriended is not alone in disturbing digital temporality to generate horror. In *Personal Shopper*, Maureen (Kristen Stewart) switches her iPhone off airplane mode, then begins receiving a stream of messages from an unknown sender, the delivery of which has been delayed: "Crown Plaza Room 329. Right Away (2h ago)." "I'll wait another hour (1h30m ago)." "I know you are reading my texts. Come (45m ago)." "Then I'll come (31m ago)." "I have spares of your keys (30m ago)." "I am in the taxi (20m ago)." "I am coming up (5m ago)." "I am on the landing (3m ago)." A sense of total dread envelops Maureen as the unknown user is suddenly lurking outside her door, seemingly moving toward her through time rather than through space. More broadly, *Personal Shopper* is a film about disrupted communication, with unknown others, with known others, with oneself, and with ghosts, with these communicative partners all blurring into each other under digital capitalism.

[10] This power of seeing without being seen connects back to the previous chapter's discussion of cyberstalking, implying that the digital stalkers haunt the individuals who they become obsessed with, moving about their profiles like specters. The user's digital profiles then become the gathering place of ghosts.

This section follows John Guillory's contention that "the proper theoretical context for conceptualizing mediation is… the process of communication" in which "grasping the nature of mediation depends… on affirming the communicative function in social relations, that is, the *possibility* of communication" (357). Relevant to this chapter, Guillory's argument about communication often relies upon the figure of the dead. For instance, Guillory avoids the "dubious intentionalism" of the "sender-receiver model of communication" by pointing out that "much communication… transmits messages already composed by another, even by the long dead" (357). In another example, Guillory points to the nineteenth century "prevalence of the spiritual medium" as "mark[ing] a transition from the notion of communication premised on face-to-face exchange to one premised on distance" in which the medium "mediated communications with the most distant of all realms" (348). Rather than being a sign of a new epoch in communication, the medium's emergence signalled the retroactive truth that "every communication is… a telecommunication" with "long distance communication" only "stand[ing] as a figure for the inherent difficulty of communication" (Guillory 334). With Maureen identifying as a medium, *Personal Shopper* displays an exacerbation of this difficulty via the digital screen as an indictment of digital capitalism more broadly, following Guillory's point that "changes in the modes of social mediation can be inferred from the operation of technical media" (343). In *Personal Shopper*, the digital screen intensifies the difficulty of communication while also intensifying what Guillory calls the "pleasure in mediation," which "spurs the creation of new media where there is no compelling social necessity for their existence" (357), a good definition of digital capitalism. The consequence of this pleasure is that "disregard for communication results in a thickening of the medium, a darkening of its substance even as attention is drawn to it" (Guillory 340). The appeal of the digital screen in facilitating communication today aligns with the opacity of the capitalist social bond, a bond involving one's relation to both living and dead persons.

An American working as the personal shopper and assistant for well-known fashion influencer Kyra (Nora von Waldstätten), Maureen informs people that she hates her job, but is suffering it to pay rent in Paris. When someone asks her what she is doing in Paris, she replies that she's "waiting." Maureen has recently lost her twin brother Lewis to a heart attack, caused by a congenital heart defect which she shares with him. Due to the closeness of their relationship, Maureen is missing an intimate part of herself.

Just as Roland Barthes suffers the "Nausea of the Irremediable" (*Mourning Diary* 97) in Paris while mourning his mother, Maureen suffers similarly in Paris while mourning her brother, experiencing "not a lack… but a *wound*" (*Mourning Diary* 65) in whose wake she "must wait for a new desire to form" (*Mourning Diary* 18). Like Maureen, Lewis identified as a medium. The two made an oath that whoever died first "would send the other a sign" from the afterlife. Maureen waits[11] in Paris for a message from Lewis, one that would enable her to move on with her life, through the generation of a new desire.

Searching for the message from Lewis, Maureen visits haunted houses as part of her side gig, performing a spiritualism incorporated into the dynamics of capitalism. Her employers are prospective home buyers who need to feel comfortable that their future property is not inhabited by malicious spirits of the past, since "it's too much of an investment" as one couple proclaim. While staying overnight in these houses, Maureen encounters phantasmatic apparitions: ghosts play with the taps, leave violent scratch marks on furniture, and vomit ectoplasm at her. Yet, these supernatural encounters remain unsatisfying since Maureen is unsure as to the meaning of the communication, leading her to exclaim at one point: "I need more from you… I don't care what you do with the fucking plumbing… I need you to fucking talk to me!" Maureen struggles with the work of mourning, involving "the attempt to work-through the messages of the other" (Laplanche qtd. in Pelento 57), to incorporate the desire of the dead as a way of orientating one's life. Ultimately, Maureen's work as a medium in the physical world declines, as she turns to digital instruments of communication to make contact with Lewis, her iPhone and MacBook Air. This turn is indicative of a more widespread social investment in these technologies for how they allow one to engage invisible presences, a mainstream spiritualism incorporated into capitalism, in which one's communicative partner may ghost (disconnect) at any time. The increased communicative connectivity of digital capitalism leads to an increased capacity for disconnection.

What exactly is the object of Maureen's search? Speaking to Kyra's former lover Ingo (Lars Eidinger) when the two meet each other in Kyra's apartment (both unsuccessfully attempting to make contact with Kyra), Maureen explains that what she is searching for is a message from the afterlife, though one could also call this afterlife "a

[11] A translator's note to Lacan's eleventh seminar notes how "in French, the phrase '*en souffrance'* means 'in suspense'… 'pending'" and "also means 'pain'" (*Seminar XI* 56). Suffering is waiting.

million things." She expands: "there are invisible presences around us, always. Whether or not they're the souls of the dead, I don't know, but when you're a medium, you just are attuned to a certain vibe. It's an intuition thing. It's a feeling you… you see this door… it's only like slightly ajar." Though Maureen is speaking to her experience as a medium, her description echoes Guillory's framing of communication as a possibility, rather than a given, or conversely an impossibility. The topic of Maureen's monologue aligns with how director Olivier Assayas describes the film in an interview, as dealing with:

> the way we mourn, the way we relate to the invisible, the way we relate to some kind of fantasy world [being] transformed, [being] complexified by the way we constantly communicate. It's a fact of modern life, and it raises a question—if we're connected with whatever we used to call the supernatural, whatever we used to call the paranormal, all of a sudden [in this connected world] the borders become porous. They become blurred. (qtd. in Macaulay n.p.)

Assayas' quote parallels Derrida's description of the internet rendering it difficult to oppose "the living to the living-dead of its ghosts" (*Specters of Marx* 212). The mode of digital mediation in which Maureen is situated makes it difficult to discern whether who or what she is communicating with is living or dead. Her work of mourning Lewis becomes what Victor Mazin describes as "differentiation… the move discriminating between the living and the dead" (n.p.), in which the gap between life and death—figured by the specter—must be discerned from a miasma of the digital undead.

Figure 9: Still from *Personal Shopper*

Though Maureen's attempts to communicate with Lewis are at the centre of the film, all her conversations resemble her failure to communicate with Lewis. Indirectly, the

film follows John Durham Peters' contention that with "modern media," there is a "difficulty of distinguishing communication at a distance from communication with the dead" (149). Though Maureen uniquely identifies as a medium, the film also suggests that many subjects under digital capitalism are mediums in one way or another. In a distanced relationship with her boyfriend Gary (Ty Olwin), Maureen listens to his complaints about how he's "been trying to reach [her] for a week" when the pair finally connect over Skype, just as Maureen's been trying to reach Lewis. Like the Skype calls of *Unfriended*, the Skype calls in *Personal Shopper* typically feature a glitchy and delayed video feed, the bright sunshine of Gary's setting a frequent contrast with the dark gloom of Maureen's cramped apartment. Like the living and dead, they exist in different temporalities. Showing an even greater disconnection, Maureen and her employer Kyra never speak directly to each other. As Maureen tells Gary: "I never see her. We leave each other messages." These messages suggest a continual missed encounter, due to the constant speed of life under digital capitalism: "Maureen: I got back but I have to leave right away. We'll miss each other." Though the two of them do not directly interact, they are close in terms of Maureen's intimacy with the material objects of Kyra, buying her clothes, lounging in her upscale Paris apartment, and updating her MacBook for her. It is through these commodities that they relate to each other.

Looking at Maureen's communications with Gary and Kyra, Guillory's distinction of distance from distanciation is helpful. For Guillory, distanciation implies the "interposition of *distance* (spatial, temporal, or even notional) between the terminal poles of the communication process," providing "the enabling condition of mediation" as well as "the possibility of media" (357). Maureen and Gary are in a distant relationship, but more significantly, they are in a distanciated relationship. With Gary himself looking like a ghost in the Skype window, he communicates his belief that ghosts do not "exist… after death, there's nothing," and that Maureen's waiting for Lewis is pointless. This belief separates him from Maureen at a more fundamental level than mere space. Similarly, the one scene in which Maureen and Kyra are in physical proximity features Maureen being unable to communicate a simple request to Kyra as the latter is on "Multiple Calls" dealing with a public relations snafu (depressed gorillas not wanting to participate in a photoshoot for her husband's charity foundation). With Kyra not even glancing at Maureen, their lack of physical distance is meaningless compared to the

distanciation between employer and employee. Working practically as Kyra's servant, Maureen represents what Jason Read calls the servant as "a universal figure of alienation," indicative of "a generalized servitude" (n.p.) to a master commanding from behind the screen.

It is this distanciation between herself and others that Maureen begins to negotiate with via the digital screen, to deal with the opacity of others through the opacity of the digital screen. The film is not exactly anti-technology, as some of Maureen's internet searches for Lewis (those conducted indirectly, rather than directly, a kind of communicating awry) invigorate her faith in the possibility of communication. Knowing Maureen has suffered a loss, an acquaintance recommends Maureen check out the Swedish abstract painter Hilma af Klint, due to how she "claims that the spirit world communicated with us, through her." Maureen googles the painter on her phone, then watches YouTubes. The videos relate the powerful communicative drive of Klint's work, coming from the grave in not being addressed toward the immediate presence of living others: "a century ago, Hilma af Klint painted for the future." Klint ordered her paintings concealed for decades after her death, until she thought their message might be received. Maureen orders and reads a book about Klint, then composes her own abstract drawings as a way of working through Lewis's death, ignoring Gary's Skype calls as she does so. Though this search begins with the digital screen, the freedom of its transmediality rests in opposition to the digital screen that begins to totally dominate other communicative efforts by Maureen.

At the midpoint of the film, Maureen begins to receive texts from an unknown sender (Unknown) that begin with: "I know You." Then: "I'm watching you." Unknown indicates that they can see that Maureen is off to London—to pick up some items for Kyra—causing Maureen to look around the train station she is passing through. Unknown appears as a specter, described by Derrida as "first of all see[ing] *us*… we feel ourselves observed, sometimes under surveillance," from behind a screen, or what Derrida calls (after a reading of *Hamlet*) the "*visor effect*" (*Specters* 125). Consequently, one of the first questions that Maureen asks Unknown is "R u alive or dead?". Though Unknown does not answer this question, Maureen continues to message with them. The little vibrations of Unknown's messages attach her to this screen-based communication through their delivery of libidinal shocks, a contrast to the anaesthetizing urban landscape of Paris which she moves through, a series of enclosed interior spaces and

transportation terminals, as if she were being shuttled through pneumatic tubes. Through her investment of communicative effort into the digital screen, the specter of Lewis is relocated behind this screen, and her encounters with ghosts in physical environments like the haunted houses subsequently cease. Messaging consistently with Unknown, Maureen begins to express a desire to become similarly spectral, to annihilate herself or just to feel nothingness. She begins to confess her desire to be "someone else" to Unknown, expressed primarily as a desire to be Kyra, or at least to inhabit the idea of Kyra. At Kyra's apartment one night, the unknown sender eventually goads her to "try on Kyra's dresses." Switching to her MacBook screen, Maureen Google stalks Kyra, swiping through photo after photo of her.

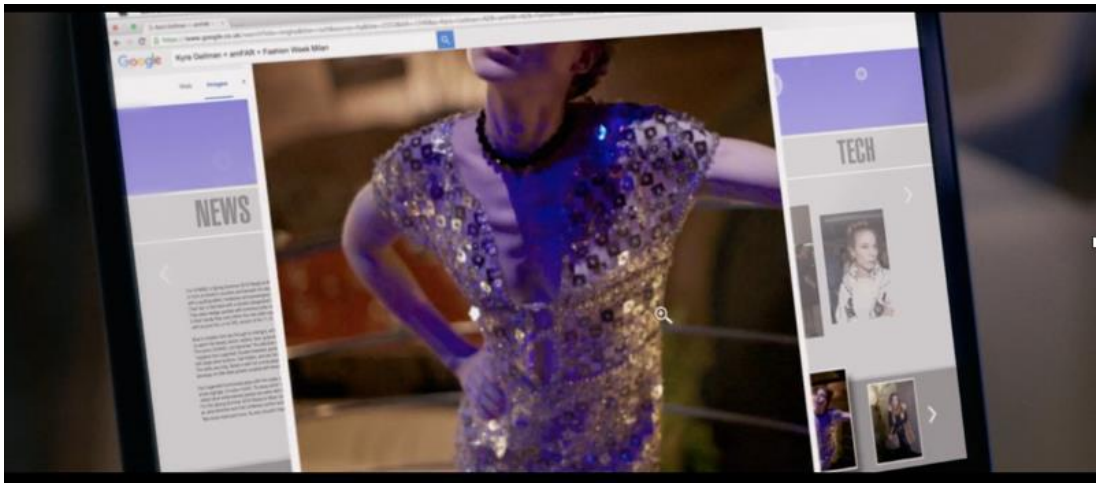

Figure 10: Still from *Personal Shopper*

In this scene (and others) in *Personal Shopper*, the camera lingers on the digital screen, capturing Maureen as the cursor on the screen that clicks the image of Kyra, that drags, that zooms in, that becomes libidinally attached to the screen. The cursor's zooming into Kyra's photos appears as a way of reducing the distance between Maureen and Kyra, but the digital screen also separates them more deeply, with Kyra rendered totally inert, purely two-dimensional, becoming (if she was not already) what Derrida calls the "screen of the commodity" (202). The scene provides an exemplary instance of what Peter Sloterdijk calls "the realistic, albeit trivial Marxist observation that the shiny surfaces of the commodity world conceal a less pleasant, sometimes bleak working world" (qtd. in Andreotti and Lahiji 167), as Maureen—having selected and tailored Kyra's luxurious look—sits alone in Kyra's darkened apartment in a t-shirt and jeans, drinking by herself. Kyra represents the commodity in the sense described by

Alexander Galloway, as an object or image “imbued with a complex interface for hiding things” through its “ability to mask its own history of production and the social division of labor that generated it” (*The Interface Effect* 68). Maureen herself is hidden within Kyra as an image. To enter this image suggests contact with a detached part of herself, but Maureen can only glide along its surface. To penetrate Kyra as surface, to cross to the other side of the screen, Maureen dresses up in Kyra’s luxury clothes—a bondage harness with a sheer outer-layer, indicating her masochistic stance toward the screen—while holding her phone, narrating to Unknown what she is doing. Instead of attempting to communicate, with all its obstacles of ambiguity and necessary interpretation, she begins to find pleasure in following the clear dictates delivered through the screen, coming from Unknown, who will remain pleasurably unknown.

The second scene in which Maureen dresses up in Kyra’s clothes explores Maureen’s behaviour to greater depth. The scene is preceded by another digital search, kicked off by a friend recommending to Maureen an online video: “if you type in like: ‘Hugo+Jersey+Turning Tables’ on YouTube, you will find it.” Maureen views the video, showing a fictional representation of Victor Hugo’s transcriptions of table-turning séances, while trying on the sparkly Chanel dress of Kyra’s that she had previously zoomed in on in the Google session. The dress is a spectacle, an uber-commodity, being all exchange-value and no use-value. It is described by the film’s costume designer Jürgen Doering as “really chic… although it's not something you would enjoy to wear to a party because you can’t sit in it, it's heavy and you can't move because it's really ‘plumpy’ but nobody watching the film knows so it gives to the image something more powerful” (n.p.). The dress sits in complete contrast with Maureen’s own utilitarian wardrobe—likely belonging to Lewis—of polo shirts, jeans, consignment sweaters, sneakers, and a well-worn leather jacket.

Personal Shopper renders explicit this contrast between use-value and exchange-value by cross-cutting Maureen’s putting on of the dress with scenes from the YouTube video of table-turning. Famously in *Capital*, Karl Marx explains the mystery of the commodity-form through a reference to table-turning, in which the use-value of the table becomes—as Derrida puts it in—“haunted by its other, namely, what will be born from the wooden head of the table, the commodity-form, and its ghost dance” (*Specters of Marx* 201). Derrida writes how the commodity—like the shaking séance table—“comes alive… it stands up and addresses itself to others… its fellow beings in

phantomality… for the specter is social" and then it "goes into trances… it appears relieved of its body… delirious, capricious, and unpredictable" (191). Inhabiting the commodity-form, Maureen travels to a hotel room Unknown has booked for her, while secretly wearing the dress under a trench-coat. When she arrives, Unknown asks her to send them a picture, which she does, becoming an image like Kyra, to Unknown's reply: "I prefer you like this." She replies, "I feel ridiculous it's not me… I don't know why I came," being swept up by the undead automaticity encoded into the commodified image of Kyra. As Derrida puts it, the commodity "appears to put itself spontaneously into motion, but it also puts others into motion" (191-2). It is the screen of the commodity that lures Maureen further into what Derrida describes as "the dimension of secrecy, mysticism, and fetishism" (178) that Marx's reference to the séance table sought to illuminate.

Through this behaviour, Maureen avoids the work of mourning, as the attempt of the living to communicate with the dead. This communication separates the living from the dead as it draws them together, like the work Hugo's transcriptions performed, with their poetic quality suggesting a significant interpretive effort. Employing the digital screen, Maureen instead elects to blend the living and the dead until they are indistinguishable, through taking refuge behind the screen of the commodity, which as Derrida writes "may always be hiding no living gaze," for it "is neither dead nor alive" (192). Rather than making contact with the invisible dead, Maureen renders herself both visible and invisible at the same time, both living and dead. As Derrida contends, Marx is not only arguing about "the phantomalization of the commodity-form but the phantomalization of the social bond, its spectralization in return, by means of a perturbed reflection" (199) in which the subject no longer recognizes themselves in the mirror of their interactions with others. Messaging through the digital screen with Unknown, Maureen's own subjectivity becomes unknown. Screening the other also screens one from themselves.

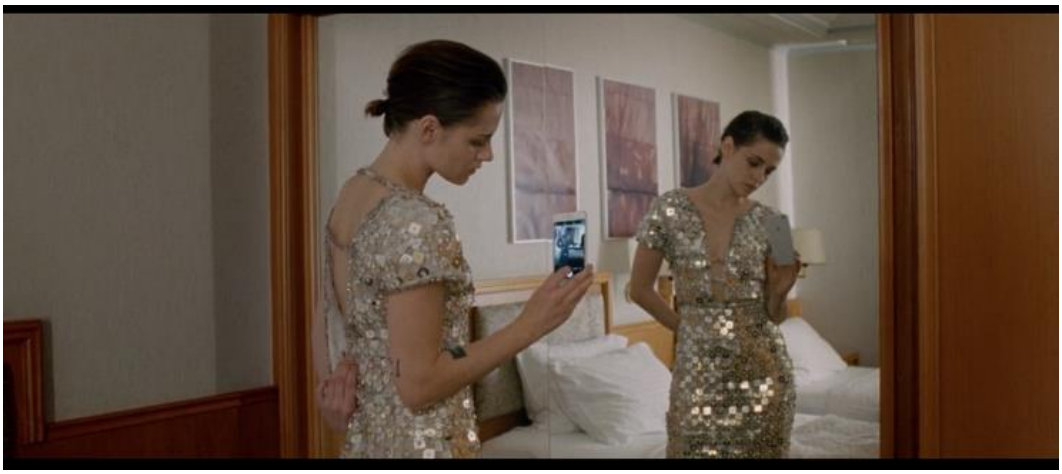

Figure 11: Still from *Personal Shopper*

Derrida does not endorse a complete autonomy or agency of the commodity. As he states: “commodities do not walk in order to take themselves willingly, spontaneously, to market, [rather] their ‘guardians’ and ‘possessors’ pretend to inhabit these things, [their] ‘will’ begin[ning] to ‘inhabit’ (*hausen*) commodities” (198). Foreseeing the digital era of “subjectivity fetishism” (Zygmunt Bauman qtd. in Harrod 87), where the subject becomes the most alluring commodity, Derrida writes how “persons are personified by letting themselves be haunted” (198) by the commodity-form. The commodity-form haunts the subject, and the subject haunts the commodity-form, the two blurring until life and death are indistinguishable. Maureen’s texts with Unknown while wearing the dress resemble what Derrida calls the “*society* or the *commerce* of specters among themselves” (7). In Derrida’s description, this society of specters involves “disguise” and “costume,” a masquerade of screen-based entities where no one is sure who is living and who is dead, in which the digital screen operates as a “technical prosthesis, a body foreign to the spectral body that it dresses, dissimulates, and protects” (7). Yet, the society of specters is not mere “play” (8) as Derrida puts it, for its driving force is money, to which “life enslaves itself regularly,” and consequently, it is capitalism that leads the “production of ghosts, illusions, simulacra, appearances, or apparitions” (55-6). In digital capitalism, the screen of the commodity and the digital screen align. The commodities that Maureen role-plays with—as seemingly neutral screens behind which she can disappear—reveal their capitalist sheen when it is discovered that Unknown is Ingo, Kyra’s former lover. Through the unknown account, he has been deceiving Maureen into believing that he might be her dead brother simply to obtain information that will allow him to kill Kyra and steal her luxury goods. Kyra is brutally murdered, her blood-soaked

corpse found by Maureen in Kyra's closet, surrounded by the commodities that will outlast her.

Nevertheless, *Personal Shopper* does not totally foreclose the possibility of the presence behind the screen being a ghost, rather splitting itself between two possibilities. In this way, the film reflects a digital world in which the uncertainty over the status of a message's sender is forever split between living and dead. Unknown messages Maureen, requesting her to bring Cartier jewellery to another hotel room they have booked for her, though it is curiously revealed that the hotel has been booked under Maureen's own name, suggesting that she might herself be Unknown. The film then cuts to black as Maureen casts a knowing look to someone coming into the room: Ingo, a ghost, nobody? The film presents the Ingo plotline, in which he arrives, takes the bags, and exits the hotel, before being accosted by the police, and then fleeing, while shooting at them (a scene which has a certain absurdity to it). But the film also presents an alternate plotline, in which an invisible presence leaves Maureen's room and moves through the hotel, the elevator and sliding doors detecting it and opening. The film establishes an indeterminacy within Unknown, being both a man who describes his motives as purely "physical" and something more ethereal as well. As a mode of communication, the digital screen still presents an enigma behind it, which *Personal Shopper* refuses to abandon by firmly locating Unknown in the realm of the living. The Unknown behind the screen remains both living and dead, simultaneously.

After Ingo is arrested by the police (or alternatively the ghost disappears), Maureen gives up the search for Lewis through the digital screen. The following scenes up to the film's conclusion are strikingly devoid of the digital screen. They instead feature Maureen in intimate, physically present conversations with friends and acquaintances. This newfound intimacy is indicated visually by Maureen finally sitting down to talk; in most of the film's previous conversations, she was always on the move or standing, ready to move again, as part of the speed of life under digital capitalism. In these conversations, there are at times successful efforts at communication, in which both parties pass something to the other—primarily a shared interpretation of what Lewis "would have wanted" as Maureen puts it—enabling both to become unstuck in their lives. The digital screen being removed, even the dead attempt communication with Maureen, with the ghost of Lewis appearing in the background of a scene, unseen, carrying a

glass which he then suddenly drops to the ground, shattering to Maureen's confused reaction. She cleans up the shattered glass, receiving the communicative act.

Figure 12: Still from *Personal Shopper*

In the final scene of the film, Maureen sees a glass being levitated by an invisible presence, which is again dropped to the ground. She asks the invisible presence questions, to which it cloyingly responds with the thumping sounds of table-turning, appearing as both Lewis and not Lewis, at peace and not at peace, meaning harm and no harm. Reflecting a general anxiety about communication, her final question is: "Lewis, is it you… or is it just me?" An affirmative thump sounds, and Maureen momentarily glances toward the cinematic screen itself, invisible within the film's diegetic space. Here is the true spectral encounter of the film, involving what Derrida calls "the specter [as] what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects—on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (125). For a film whose visual space has been dominated by actual screens, from MacBooks, to phones, to medical imaging screens, this sudden contact with an invisible screen stands out. The screen that Maureen detects signals "the inherent difficulty of communication" (334) that Guillory mentions, a difficulty for which the digital screen acts as a representative, though one whose opaqueness favours the pleasure of mediation over the possibility of communication. By contrast, Maureen's encounter with the invisible screen at the end suggests both the difficulty and possibility of communication, primarily with herself: the ultimate tele-communication under digital capitalism. Maureen finally looks as if she had seen a ghost.

Googling the Dead Back to Life

Like *Unfriended*, all events of *Searching* transpire within the confines of the digital screen; unlike *Unfriended*, a variety of digital screens orientate the cinematic space, from desktop computers to MacBooks to smartphones. Moreover, the camera zooms in and pans these digital screens as if miming the look of their user, as opposed to the static screen of *Unfriended*. That it is possible for a film to be set completely within the parameters of another medium indicates the ties that bind between the digital and the cinematic. As Lev Manovich relates: "cinema, the major cultural form of the twentieth century, has found a new life as the toolbox of a computer user" since its "aesthetic strategies have become basic organizational principles of computer software" (92). It is the underlying cinematic structure of the internet that leads to the relative ease with which *Unfriended* and *Searching* are able to locate all of their events within the digital screen. Both can subtract the camera from the film, since the camera is already operative in how the characters navigate through their computer screens, whether zooming in on photos (clicking enlarge), panning (dragging), or cutting away from certain windows (clicking the 'x' button). The cursor is the camera. As a similar example of one medium remediating the other, Derrida writes how his computer's word processor remediates the book, as it:

> still conforms to the spectral model of the book. Everything that appears on the screen is arranged *with a view* to books: writing, lines, numbered pages, coded indications of forms (italics, bold, etc.), the differences of the traditional shapes and characters. There are some tele-writing machines that don't do this, but 'ours' still respect the figure of the book—they serve it and mimic it, they are wedded to it in a way that is quasi-spiritual, 'pneumatic,' close to breathing… (*Paper Machine* 30)

This continual breathing of older media within newer media is spectral, and films like *Unfriended* and *Searching* illuminate the cinematic past in the digital present.

Searching opens with a montage of the life events of a couple, David Kim (John Cho) and Pamela Nam Kim (Sara Sohn), as captured by their Windows XP computer, following the birth of their daughter, Margot (Alex Jayne Go/Megan Liu/Kyra Dawn Lau/Michelle La). Prior to directing *Searching*, Aneesh Chaganty wrote and directed commercials for Google. As Chaganty states in an interview, the opening to *Searching* was shot in the style of a Google commercial (Jung n.p.), such as the "Parisian Love" commercial discussed in this dissertation's introduction. Along with focusing on happy

life events like “Parisian Love,” *Searching*’s opening also captures a less happy side of search, showing Google searches for “how to fight lymphoma as a family,” when Pam finds out she has been diagnosed with cancer via email. The search result clicked on, “Cancer Workout Program,” is initially successful in sustaining the family in a positive mindset, captured by David’s vlogs of him and Pam exercising together. Pam recovers, but then relapses, captured again by David’s vlog, in which Pam cannot complete the exercise. The search result fails, and eventually, the family suffers her tragic loss. The film’s opening montage transitions into the real-time events of the present day, indicated by the blinking cursor showing the user’s current position on the screen, the spatial marker also a temporal one.

Figure 13: Still from *Searching*

Searching displays the various ways death can be mediated through the digital screen. Messaging with Margot, David deletes some text he has typed about how Pam would be proud of Margot prior to sending. This moment of reticence signals a more long-lasting blockage in their communication about Pam’s death that the ultra-connectivity of the digital only renders more prominent, as Margot and David’s constant communication only circulates around this absence of communication. After deleting the prospective message, David puts on “4 hours Peaceful & Relaxing Instrumental Music” on YouTube and distracts himself by opening multiple links to news websites. His digital anesthetizing is interrupted by a FaceTime call from his brother Peter (Joseph Lee), who asks him for an old recipe of Pam’s. David searches through his computer for it, finds it, then sends it to his brother. But the search also brings up an unexpected find, a video

file capturing Pam's cooking of the recipe with Margot, which David clicks. In the video, Pam tells him to "turn it off," meaning the camera at the time of the video's recording, but now a message in which Pam might be speaking to David in the present. Nevertheless, David continues to watch the video, his facial expression in the window of the disconnected FaceTime call regressing from happiness to sorrow.

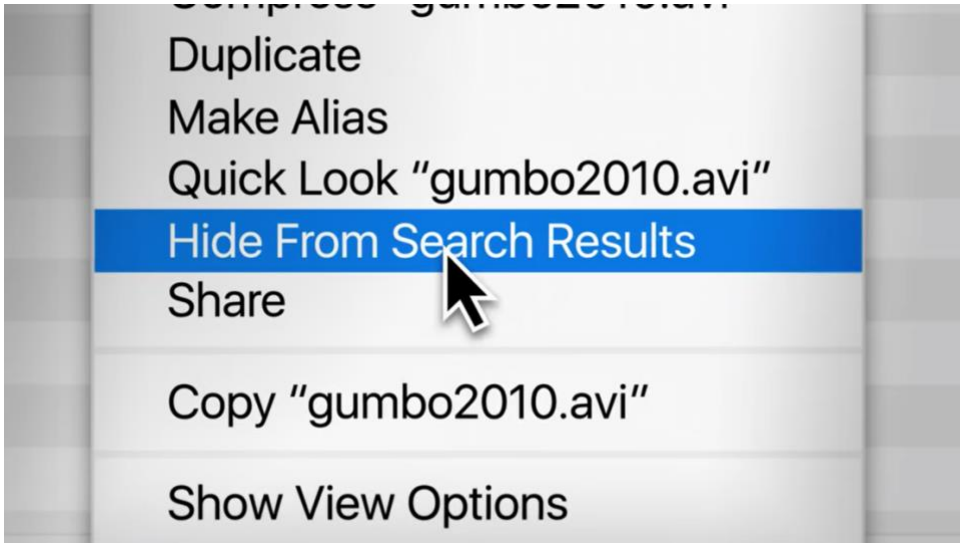

Figure 14: Still from *Searching*

Afterwards, the cursor hovers over possible actions that David can perform with the file, displaying the various mediations of death enabled by the computer. In Freud's analysis of how the psyche mediates trauma, he delineates what Giuseppe Iurato relates as the "four main defence mechanisms" (12) of *Verneinung* (negation), *Verleugnung* (disavowal), *Verwerfung* (foreclosure), and *Verdrängung* (repression). Following the mechanism of negation, David can reject the video, thinking "that's not what I was looking for," when perhaps that was what he truly wanted to find. Clicking on the file and revealing a list of options, David could also "Compress" the file, a version of disavowal. As Iurato explains, disavowal "does not entail the deletion of either a perception or a representation, but rather it entails the rejection of the meaning (signified) that this implies" (10). The file remains but its content becomes zipped up and inaccessible unless it is purposefully unzipped (avowed in its significance). Another possibility: David can perform the stronger action of "Move to Trash," aligning with foreclosure in the sense of involving "the refusal of the inscription of a signifier in the symbolic chain" (12). Given the materiality of digital memory, the file still exists as an inscription, but in a field beyond the reach of David's cursor. Later into the film, David eventually performs this

action on the file, but in this scene, he performs repression, selecting “Hide from Search Results.” According to Iurato, repression “eliminates from consciousness… those affects and representations which are, in some way, incompatible… with the pleasure principle” (12). The affect is not deleted, but simply transferred to the unconscious, which becomes positioned within the digital screen. Given that *Searching* documents at length David’s difficulties with expressing his emotions over the death of Pam, this digital action embodies David’s entire approach to the mourning process. The scene also parallels Blaire’s attempt in *Unfriended* to repress Laura from public search results. Both actions attempt to bury the dead within the screen.

While David represses the lost object of Pam into the digital screen, he ends up employing this same screen to retrieve another object lost within its depths, when Margot goes missing and is presumed dead. With Pam, David wants to hide from search results; with Margot, he wants to find from search results. As indicated by the title of the film, he tracks Margot entirely through digital search. He searches his email, Margot’s contacts, her financial accounts, and googles multiple items of interest; he uses Google Maps to plot out her potential movements; he searches her internet history by “Most visited all-time”; he performs a reverse Google image search for a person of interest in the case. As opposed to the hapless police detective Rosemary Vick (Debra Messing), David’s searches prompt all the major breakthroughs in the case, demonstrating the investigative power of Google, and prompting the question, is *Searching* a Google commercial? Finally, it is with a Google search for Vick that David begins to unravel how the detective covered up for her son, who had pushed Margot into a ravine after having catfished her for several months. Miraculously, Margot has survived at the bottom of the ravine for five days. Father and daughter are reunited.

The improbability of the film’s ending suggests a fantasmatic element at work: David can employ digital search to bring Margot back to life, to retrieve her from the digital afterlife. More generally, Google can reverse death. In this way, *Searching* supports the dominant ideology of digital platforms in their attempts to mediate death. For instance, Google has “launched a sub-company called Calico whose stated mission is ‘to solve death’” (Harari 60), part of a tendency of digital capitalism in which death is viewed as a “technical problem [with] a technical solution” (Harari 57). Google, along with the various platforms of digital capitalism, forms part of what Todd McGowan describes as a longer tendency of capitalism in helping “people to elude… confrontation

with death" (*Capitalism and Desire* 151). Indirectly—or perhaps directly, given Chaganty's prior employment at Google—*Searching* supports these ideologies through its depiction of Google being used to triumph over death. The film provides an example of what McGowan calls the "cinema of integration" (*The Real Gaze* 117), which "structures every absence that it mobilizes through a fantasmatic scenario that envisions the elimination of this absence" (117), a cinema in which all searches find their objects. In the cinema of integration, McGowan points out how the necessary trauma of loss is fantasmatically overcome, and thereby "trauma loses its ability to shake us loose from our immersion within ideology" (221). Along these lines, the fantasmatic scenario of *Searching* involves Google's capacity to locate a lost loved one, thus expanding the ideological field of objects retrievable by a search.

This argument depends on the lost object of *Searching* being simultaneously both Margot and Pam, with Margot's retrievability from death blurring with Pam's irretrievability. At a visual level, the film supports this argument through Pam always being depicted with Margot, and rarely alone. More significantly, David's search for Margot must pass through Pam, as he signs into her Windows profile to access contact information for Margot's friends. Upon entering, David is interpellated as Pam through a warning: "you have not run Norton Antivirus in 695 days." The alert marks the last time Pam accessed this profile, prior to her death. Having lain undisturbed for almost two years, David's intrusion into the profile's dormant state lends the whole scene a spectral aura, causing his cursor to move around gingerly and respectfully. Once again, David's search for Margot must pass through Pam when he tries to access Margot's Facebook profile, and the circuitous password retrieval process ultimately leads him back to the recovery email belonging to his wife, which he logs into. Pam's email account has accumulated 4,068 unread emails, and 10,578 spam emails since she last accessed it. Daily emails continue to be sent to Pam: advertisements for life insurance and piano tuning, employment offers, and a lymphoma newsletter. Pam still exists as an addressee for these automatic emails, with David intruding into a bustling communicative sphere in which the non-human converses with ghosts. Of the three films analyzed in this chapter, *Searching* is the film that least belongs to the horror genre, yet these are some of the eeriest scenes of all the films.

Figure 15: Still from *Searching*

Nevertheless, this eeriness is escaped from through David's frantic search to save Margot from a similar fate. Consequently, the ultimate success of this search involves a necessary negation of the nagging problem of Pam's ultimate irretrievability from the film, despite the litany of digital objects that render her (painfully) searchable. The final click of the film involves the changing of the computer screen's desktop picture from an image of Margot and Pam to one of Margot and David. This final scene represents—in a familial rather than romantic sense—the "fantasmatic image of the successful couple" that McGowan contends dominates the cinema of integration, which is highlighted "to the exclusion of all other narrative developments, thereby erasing the power of other antagonisms" (*The Real Gaze* 118). The loss which cannot be mediated by digital search, which must be hidden from search, is overcome through the retrieval of a different lost object, making up for both losses. Margot must be lost and found by David, so that he can get over the loss of Pam.

Searching reworks a reality in which digital searches for the lost and presumed dead are often endless and unresolvable. To look at a local example, Ryan Shtuka vanished from a British Columbian ski resort giving rise to a search campaign led by his family that continues. Beyond his grieving family, these disappearances tap into something more collective, particularly in the digital age. Like the #FindMargo hashtag which begins trending on social media in *Searching*, Shtuka's disappearance prompted a #FindRyanShtuka hashtag prompting "droves" of people to arrive from "social media"

to aid in the search (“Peaks and Valleys”). A whole industry of podcasts, YouTube channels and message boards demonstrate a collective fascination with the search for Shtuka and similar cases, all thriving on the amount of information accessible through the internet to aid in the sleuthing, just as David was aided. The absolute disappearance of an individual is rendered more remarkable in an age in which everyone is forever tracked by their digital devices, creating a dialectical tension in which disappearance becomes more traumatic, leading to the libidinal involvement of strangers in these searches. These disappearances expose the limits of digital mediation, limits which internet users do not want to see, so they are more than willing to participate in an attempt at their overcoming.

Addressing the mourning practices of the digital era, Stephen Hartman writes that “cyberspace is transforming loss into a collective event endowing the lost object with a new kind of immortality” (455), in which “suffering is increasingly mitigated and reconstituted by mourning’s sudden twin: cybermourning” (459). Pointing to a new mediation of death, Hartman writes how in contrast to “traditional reality” in which lost objects “linger… as spectral presences waiting to be finally laid to rest, mourned,” the digital era sees “mourned objects become enigmas, rather than ghosts” (460). Sufferers of the loss can “search… indefinitely” (Hartman 460) as a way of coping with the loss, forever pursuing the lost one through the seemingly limitless digital archive. Similarly speaking of the digital mediation of death, Richard Frankel writes how “the location and tracking of the virtual other feels so alive and real it overrides its own dependence on mutual, reciprocal interacting to sustain it,” leading to “a melancholic stance where the bereaved desperately seeks to keep the object alive” (14). More collectively, internet users mediate the limit of death into a search without end, investing in the internet as a dominant mode of mediation for dealing with death and loss. It is this digital mediation for which *Searching* provides a fantasmatic support, thus diluting anxiety about how even a powerful finding interface like Google cannot find the dead.

Impossible Search Results

Looking back to this dissertation’s previous chapter, the screen appears therein as a necessary element to intersubjectivity, both protecting the subject from the gaze of the Other, as well as generating a surface for the projection of fantasies related to the desire of the Other. Digital capitalism exploits the fantasmatic screen of intersubjectivity

by offering the subject a proliferation of material screens to support and modify its function. As the previous chapter argues, the results of this cultural attempt at taming alterity through material screens only exacerbates the eventual eruption of alterity, leading to traumatic encounters. Similarly, this chapter points to how the screen is a necessary element to subjectivity itself, in screening off the alterity of death. As opposed to the alterity of a feminine Other that captures the gazes of Joe Goldberg and Alice Hare, this chapter focuses on what Rik Loose calls the "terror of [death's] radical otherness [that] stares one in the face and captures one's gaze, due to the fascination for this realm beyond life" (143). In both cases, this gaze draws the users (whether willingly or not) deeper into the internet in search of an encounter with it, suggesting that the impossible final search result of Google is both death and a Woman. Musing about the classical connection "between woman and death" that obsessed Freud, Loose writes that "the aesthetic beauty of the feminine figure [is] one possible barrier against this terrifying otherness" (143) of death. In other words, the Woman operates as a defence for the subject's "function of desire [that] stands in a fundamental relationship to death" (Loose 143), in being driven toward a spectral object. In this light, Joe and Alice's Google stalking is also driven toward death, though for them the Woman operates to "protect [them] against death" through "stitch[ing] up" (Loose 143) the void that lurks behind their searches. Maureen's Google stalking of Kyra bridges these two chapters. In both chapters, googling operates as a defence against death.

As summarized by Jan De Vos, "Freud argues that human beings cannot think or even conceive of their own death, and that unconsciously everyone is convinced of their immortality" (7). Screens must be continually produced to ward off the knowledge of death. Indirectly explaining the alignment of these two chapters, Slavoj Žižek points out that "Derrida's spectre perfectly fits the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy" in which both function "as the common matrix that confers consistency upon the plurality of social practices" (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 199), all of which are held together by "the pure surface of fantasy [that] is not to be found anywhere in 'reality'" (199). In other words, the mode of mediation is held together by something invisible, something that does not materially exist, a repressed kernel. This "formal matrix" (Žižek 199) is neglected by an understanding of mediation as complete, as argued by Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska. It is this pure surface (or screen) that is "the locus of mediation" (*Seminar XI* 107) as stated by Lacan. This pure screen is engaged with by the material

screens of the digital mode of mediation, which rather than being mere epiphenomena of the pure screen, exist in a dialectical relationship with it. The pure screen of the specter exists in a dialectical relationship with all the material surfaces upon which we project the specter, and thus the films of this chapter each constitute cultural interventions into the figure of the specter.

Rather than employing the internet in the impossible task to evade death, what would it mean to employ the internet to engage death? The paradox of the internet's solving of death for the subject is that it threatens the subject. As De Vos argues, "the tell-tale sign of the death of subjectivity might be precisely the point at which the fantasy of immortality comes in" (16) through the internet, for subjectivity only emerges through engagement with death: "it is only from a presupposed, imagined (and thus virtual) non-presence that we can think about and construct our presence" (7). The path forward would follow the pedagogy of psychoanalysis, which Nathan Gorelick contends is "more than anything, about life after death, about the death we are always already living, about how to live with rather than against—to live *through*—the death which drives us" (232). Rather than hiding from the specter's gaze, the user would follow Derrida's proposed "technique… for *seeing* ghosts [which] is in truth a technique to *make oneself seen by* ghosts" as "*the ghost, always, is looking at me*" (*Specters of Marx* 168). Despite its opacity, the computer screen cannot block this gaze, and we cannot ghost nor unfriend the past.

Chapter 4

Searching for Indigeneity: The Real Gaze of Settler Colonialism

This chapter examines Indigenous cultural objects that work with settler colonial signifiers rather than creating new signifiers of Indigeneity. In Joan Copjec's reading of Lacan, she notes that "the signifier alone makes vision possible," as the subject sees through "an arbored screen of signifiers" (34-5). For Copjec, the signifier is "opaque rather than translucent, refer[ring] to other signifiers rather than directly to a signified" and thus "the field of vision is neither clear nor easily traversable" but "instead ambiguous and treacherous, full of traps" (34). Rather than imagining through the signifier, the cultural objects under analysis in this chapter work with the opacity of the signifier—its structure as a screen—to set different traps. They inhabit the signifier-screen of Indigeneity, as it has been concretized by settler colonialism to stabilize the settler subject. This chapter contends that the settler colonial subject's vision—its imaginary—is necessarily entangled with an impossibility of vision—its real. In other words, the settler colonial subject is constituted not by what they see, but by what they cannot see. From this visual impossibility, they are separated by the screen, producing a visual loss for whose recuperation the subject then (often violently) searches. By aesthetically manipulating this screen, the settler colonial subject's way of seeing can potentially be destabilized, demonstrating the impossibility of what they are searching for. Rather than revealing Indigeneity, this chapter's cultural objects reconceal Indigeneity via the aesthetic reworking of the screen, generating not new modes of seeing, but new modes of not seeing, thereby operating with the real rather than the imaginary.

The two Indigenous cultural objects examined in this chapter were both released in the year following the final report of Canada's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2015). Neither are reconciliatory in spirit, but both are split between Indigenous and settler colonial modes of representation, and thus necessarily mediatory. They are Inuit directors Zacharias Kunuk and Natar Ungalaaq's *Maliglutit (Searchers)* (2016), a remake of western classic *The Searchers* (Ford 1956), and Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel's book of poetry *Injun* (2016), a reworking of 91 western novels that have entered the public

domain. They address not only settler colonialism as a historical phenomenon, but the subject of settler colonialism, established through the screening of Indigeneity. Rather than offering a new vision of Indigeneity, these works align with Lacan's argument that "beyond the signifying network, beyond the visual field, there is, in fact, nothing at all," as the screen of "representation actually conceals nothing" (Copjec 35). Crucially, this void of the signified does not figure an "unrealizable ideal"—what cannot be captured by language—but rather "indicates an impossible real," the real of the subject's desire that "seeks after" (Copjec 35-6) this impossibility. For Lacan, this void is the site of a gaze, which structures the visual field, rather than the visual field being constructed by the individual looks of subjects. This gaze, in the form of object *a* (the object-cause of desire in the visual field), can only be approached by the subject through the function of the screen. The screen is both a fantasmatic manipulation of the visual field by the subject, a screening of what cannot be seen for it would annihilate the subject, and material, with various cultural objects (Lacan's primary examples are masks and paintings) establishing a collective negotiation with the gaze at a more social level. It is through the attraction of this gaze that *Maliglutit* and *Injun* address the subject of settler colonialism, operating at the level of the unconscious structure of their scopic desire, rather than through the strategy of consciousness raising about Indigeneity, which potentially only fuels settler desire and consumption. For settlers, it is the unconscious that is settler colonial, and thus the site of true political change.

For the subject of settler colonialism, the impossible object is Indigeneity. The subject desires Indigeneity, in the sense of being seen as Indigenous to the land which is their (illusory) home, leading to a mix of fantasies, anxieties, and collective searching for signifiers of Indigeneity. Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin describe the settler subject as both "displac[ing], and desir[ing] the indigene," leading to "parallel loathing and desire" (qtd. in Byrd 85). Similarly, Alissa Macoun and Elizabeth Strakosch explicate the libidinal nature of settler colonialism:

> settler colonialism operates as a fantasy, in the sense that it endlessly merges together its desires and reality. For example, settlers simultaneously assert colonialism to be finished while seeking to finish it, and proclaim the land to be empty in the same moment they confront an Aboriginal person. Such fantasies are animated by the intensity of our political desires and emotions, and these desires belong to individuals even as they circulate throughout society. (433-4)

To the subject of settler colonialism, the Indigenous person flickers between a negative hallucination and a screen for projections.

Both *Maliglutit* and *Injun* operate in this libidinal terrain, intervening into the cultural screening of Indigeneity (both the projection of fantasies of Indigeneity, and the screening of the traumatic real of Indigeneity), through a dialectical play of occlusion and representation. They lure their viewer toward a confrontation with the gaze, the impossible object of desire that both lies beyond the settler colonial visual field and permeates it at every level. Indigeneity exerts both a fascination over the settler subject, who continually searches for representations of Indigeneity, as well as a profound anxiety, in that the truth of this desire's impossibility threatens to unsettle the subject's stability. By screening this impossibility, *Maliglutit* and *Injun* shift the settler colonial visual field from one structured by the desire for a lost object that might reconcile the settler colonial project with itself, to one structured by drive, in which the impossibility of the settler colonial project is circulated around at a scopic level.

This chapter expands on Métis scholar David Garneau's identification of "screen objects" ("Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation" 26) as an enduring tradition of Indigenous art and political resistance. In formulating the Indigenous screen object, Garneau adapts Freud's metaphor of a screen that stands between the conscious and unconscious, mediating the visual representation of disavowed desires or past traumas in dreams, fantasies, and memories. Transposing Freud's metaphor from the psychical to the aesthetic field, Garneau follows a long scholarly tradition. As Rachel Furnari explains, "Freud's discussion of screen memory within the psychoanalytic model is an important touchstone because it engendered a modern trajectory of theorizing the screen as a site of mediation" (n.p.). According to Furnari, the multiple senses of the term screen can be separated into two dominant groups over time, establishing a founding "dialectic [for] many of the debates over 'screen' technology and theorization" (n.p.). In the first group, the screen is "opaque" and "obscure[s] and conceal[s]" (n.p.) something lying behind it. In the second, "light may pass through the screen, sometimes maintaining [its] integrity, sometimes [being] violated or mediated" (Furnari n.p.). To screen an image can mean both to show and hide simultaneously. Freud's "Screen Memories" and *The Interpretation of Dreams* harness this linguistic ambivalence of the screen as metaphor, outlining multiple possible relations a visual representation can hold to its "suppressed material" ("Screen Memories" 319), from total repression

(opaqueness) to faint elucidation (translucency). In this regard, Lacan contends that the Freudian model of the unconscious is “optical” not “spatial” or “anatomical,” as it “represents a number of layers, permeable to something analogous to light whose refraction changes from layer to layer” (*Seminar XI* 45).

The case study recounted in “Screen Memories” involves Freud himself as the patient under analysis. Freud relates how his unconscious conceals the desire to deflower a past love interest in a recollected image from childhood of bright yellow flowers. This image’s visual properties are intensified in “hallucinatory fashion” (“Screen Memories” 311) due to the unconscious converting the denied past “into a shape capable of visual representation” (316). Paradoxically, visuality offers the best hiding spot for what otherwise cannot be brought to light. Along these lines, Indigenous artworks are forcefully figured as the yellow flowers of settler colonial memory, being consumed for their presumed primitive beauty, while simultaneously enabling a disavowal of the past. As Garneau contends, “Haida totem poles and masks, Blackfoot teepee painting, Sioux and Métis quill and beadwork, Algonquin False Face masks, contemporary Woodland Cree style painting and Inuit carving… are essential to the post-colonial visual [brand]” of Canada (“Indigenous Art” 315). Due to the popularity of these sanitized representations, Indigenous artists must compete against “diluted and much cheaper copies of their own work” (315). Their popularity stems from how they enable the settler subject to put Indigeneity to rest by securing it within an innocuous representational frame, locating Indigeneity in the past rather than the present. The ubiquity of these works in settler colonialism’s visual field enables a continual cathexis with illusory appearances of Indigeneity over the real of Indigeneity.

In the local context of settler colonialism from which I am writing (the province of British Columbia in Canada), there exists long histories of visual subterfuge. In “The Construction of the “Imaginary Indian” (1991), Tsimshian-Haida critic Marcia Crosby relates how “Canadians’ fear of the hostile forces of nature/indigene” were tamed through paintings of “passive, colonized Indian-as-landscape” (282) in Euro-Canadian art, charting examples from 1665-1929. As severe assimilationist violence toward Indigenous peoples was being committed through state actions such as the Indian Act of 1876, Euro-Canadian artists coincidentally produced a “smokescreen” (Crosby 279) of

supposedly authentic representations of Indigeneity.[12] The plight of actual Indigenous peoples was being overlooked, and an Imaginary Indian was being looked at to excess. For Crosby, this Imaginary Indian was established through the "West's assumed right to use native figures, myths and visual arts for various purposes—including the colonization of native culture—in a search for its own 'roots'" (281). As an object of settler colonial desire, "the Indian was neatly contained within the institutional glass class, carefully locked away as a repository for the unthinkable or unspeakable parts of those who created it" (297). In this way, Indigeneity functions for the settler subject as what Todd McGowan calls the "*objet petit a*… an object that the subject separates itself from in order to constitute itself as a desiring subject" (*The Real Gaze* 6). It is an impossible object since unlike real Indigenous peoples, this Indigeneity does not and cannot exist.

In this regard, the paintings of Emily Carr come under concentrated fire in Crosby's essay. Though Carr's paintings "paid a tribute to the Indians she 'loved'" (285), Crosby still has questions: "who were they? Were they the real or authentic Indians who only existed in the past, or the Indians in the nostalgic, textual remembrances she created in her later years? They were not the native people who took her to the abandoned villages on 'a gas boat' rather than a canoe'" (285). Carr's paintings of abandoned villages like *Tanoo* (1913) "intimate that the authentic Indians who made them existed only in the past, and that all the changes that occurred afterwards provide evidence of racial contamination, and cultural and moral deterioration" (285). Crucially, Crosby does not make her argument against Carr simply at the level of her demonstrating malicious intent. Rather, she describes how these paintings operate as an unconscious defence of Carr's own ego: "if [Carr] did forge a deep bond with an imaginary, homogenous heritage, it was something that acted as a container for her

[12] Crosby explains how this settler colonial artistic practice both influenced and reinforced governmental policy, with the two merging together through their mutual emphasis on Indigenous authenticity. For example, "local white officials" confirmed whether an Indigenous artistic or ethnographic practice was authentic (276), rather than Indigenous peoples. Moreover, there was the historical paralleling of "the scientific documentation of the last of 'authentic' Indian culture… with the formation of the Indian Act, whose mandate was to 'get rid of the Indian problem'" (273), the problem being that real Indigenous people had persisted into the present.

Eurocentric beliefs, her search for a Canadian identity and her artistic intentions" (287). Carr's paintings acted as a defence against "what [she] did not and perhaps could not see" (278), her own entanglement in the scenes she painted, her own desire on the canvas. At the social level, the widespread institutionalization of Carr's paintings in B.C.'s most prominent museums functions like a collective screen memory establishing an opaque relation to B.C.'s settler colonial past, "a province where the majority of land is stolen, even by the standards of colonial law" (Knight 234). Nevertheless, Crosby's interpretation of Carr's paintings as purely imaginary eludes the fact that every painting necessarily mediates the gaze rather than overcoming the gaze. There are elements of the real within the imaginary of Carr's paintings. Behind the painting, there lurks what Carr calls in her recounting of the trip to Tanoo, the unspeakable, "horrible feeling down inside" (*Klee Wyck* 14) experienced in being momentarily abandoned in the abandoned village by her Indigenous guides, left alone with Tanoo's "wall-eyed stare out over the sea" (13). In my own viewing, the gaze comes through the painting in the black blot near its centre, where an entrance to the village appears ajar.

Unlike Carr's paintings, the Indigenous screen objects of this chapter work primarily to attract the real gaze, rather than to contain it. Combining the screen's possibilities of both opacity and translucency, Garneau conceives an artwork representing Indigeneity that does not only conceal or reveal, but rather conceals and reveals simultaneously. Charting a global history of Indigenous screen objects, Garneau observes a tendency of settler eyes being drawn in by the "patina" of Indigenous authenticity, then being refracted away from the "essential" content ("Imaginary Spaces" 26). In Garneau's description, this essential content is only accessible by the knowing look of another Indigenous person from the same community as the artist. As an example, Garneau references the paintings of Alex Janvier, in which beneath the visual styling of non-objective Modernist art, there hid maps of the artist's lived relations, along with good hunting and fishing spots. But Garneau's example here possibly bears a certain trickery. To apply this example to all Indigenous artwork leads to what Slavoj Žižek describes as the "fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 3), in which all Indigenous artworks contain some secret meaning inaccessible to settler eyes. Instead, Žižek points out that the goal of interpretation is "not the content hidden by the form… but on the contrary, *the 'secret' of this form itself*" (3), indirectly implying the secret operation of the screen in Janvier's

painting, concealing hunting spots within Modernist art. Ultimately, it is better to ask what work the screen is performing in individual works, rather than attempt to penetrate its veil.

Through the interplay of occlusion and representation, the Indigenous screen object challenges the ongoing scopophilia of the settler subject toward representations of Indigeneity. In scopophilia, Copjec explains how the "subject is… thought to identify with and thus, in a sense, to coincide with the gaze" (36). Yet, Lacan posits that the gaze is not what the viewer directs at the object, but rather what returns from the object, being "located 'behind' the image, as that which fails to appear in it and thus as that which makes all its meanings suspect" (Copjec 36). The viewing subject, "instead of coinciding with or identifying with the gaze, is rather *cut off from it*" (Copjec 36). The knowing look of the Indigenous person discussed by Garneau flips from an individual position assumable in front of the work, toward a more pervasive and threatening one located behind the work. Addressing the continual failures of settler critics to grapple with the political implications of Indigenous art, Garneau suggests that what they fear is "that the former objects of their gaze have become self-aware critical agents" ("Indigenous Art" 312). In this characterization, Garneau's screen objects follow Freud's description in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of a "critical agency [that] stands like a screen between the [unconscious] and consciousness," particularly in dreams, but also "directs our waking life and determines our voluntary, conscious actions" (542). Similarly, Garneau's screen objects operate through a style of dream-like vision, but one with implications for the waking world as well.

Some of these implications enact a return upon psychoanalysis itself. Rather than being the objects of psychoanalysis as in works like Freud's *Totem and Taboo*—described by David Gaertner as involving the "subjugation of 'primitives' [as] the primary rhetorical tool used to advance the author's argument" (62)—Indigenous screen objects render psychoanalysis the residual object if it cannot keep up with the stakes of their psychical interventions. While Lacan writes how the subject is not "entirely caught up in [the] imaginary capture" (*Seminar XI* 107) of vision due to their subjection to a gaze that operates by non-visual means, he did not foresee the extent to which one group of people would attempt to capture another in the imaginary realm—the Imaginary Indian—at the scale of settler colonialism. Thus, while Lacan muses about how the subject "isolates the function of the screen and plays with it" (*Seminar XI* 107) in relation to the

gaze, the Indigenous screen object is no mere play, but a mode of survival. Rather than psychoanalyzing Indigeneity, it is psychoanalysis that must grapple with the lessons of Indigenous artists' mediation of settler colonialism. Historically, psychoanalysis only develops from its concepts being inhabited by hostile guests.

Encouraging the turn to Lacan to further develop Garneau's theory, the aesthetic theory of the Indigenous screen object bears a striking resemblance to Lacan's concept of the screen. Masks frequent both the theories of Garneau and Lacan as the screen object *par excellence*, with Lacan stating that artists singularly "[know] how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze" (*Seminar XI* 107). In both Lacan and Garneau's theory, this screen enables a creative manipulation of an external field to the visual sphere, one that nevertheless structures the visual field. As Allan Rae writes, Lacan had his own theory of "the screen-object, in the material echo of that immaterial, structural form which Lacan theorises as the central component of the vision/gaze dichotomy," in which the "the screen-object is *already negotiating*, already permitting the negotiation with the gaze which reveals the desire of the subject caught upon its surface" (72). The vision/gaze dichotomy will be elucidated further into this chapter. For now, it bears mentioning that Lacan's theory of the screen does not only address the subject, but also what Rae calls "the cultural production of the screen… furnish[ing] us with a logic of the screen's cultural standing by emphasising the central function of the screen *for* the desiring subject" (128). For the subject of settler colonialism, the cultural screen "works to guarantee subjective stability, to orient fantasy and prevent the destabilising revelation of the impossibility of desire (in other words, the impossibility of attaining the object of desire) from threatening the subject's consistency" (Rae 128-9). Through reconfiguring the cultural screen, the Indigenous screen objects of this chapter threaten to unsettle their viewers at the level of their unconscious, illuminating the impossibility of what they are searching for.

From Visual Mastery to Visual Alterity

Theoretical approaches to settler colonialism frame its visual field as dominated by a settler gaze that seeks to master Indigenous texts and peoples, much like how Laura Mulvey wrote of a masculine gaze that objectified women in cinema: "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (qtd. in McGowan 8). Looking to settler colonialism's origins in imperialism,

Mary Louise Pratt describes “imperial eyes [which] passively look out and possess” (9) as fundamental to early narratives of conquest. Like a powerful technology, Pratt relates how “the (lettered, male, European) eye… could familiarize (‘naturalize’) new sites/sights immediately upon contact” (31) thus supporting the spread of imperialism across the globe. Leaping ahead to the present day, this determining gaze continues to emit from the eyes of settler colonial subjects, particularly in the field of academic research. Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck contends that the reading of Indigenous texts in the academy remains “settlerish,” meaning that these texts continue to be “read extractively, for discovery,” as the history of settler colonialism sets “up settlers to be terrible readers of Indigenous work” (@tuckeve). For Tuck, writing with K. Wayne Yang, this “spectacle of the settler colonial gaze” (223) damages her own writing and thus must be kept at arm’s length. Frequently, Tuck and Yang emphasize the mastery of this settler colonial gaze, its all-too-easy absorption of difference into white, settler colonial master narratives of progress, of the nation, of the university, etc. Meanwhile, settler scholars like Sam McKegney seek to resolve the problem of the settler colonial visual field by focusing on settler eyes, writing how in encountering Indigenous texts, “the recipient/reader’s eyes are opened so that she or he can see the world more clearly” (51), recounting how Indigenous poetry “has symbolically cleansed [his own] eyes” (53). Yet, turning one’s eyes upon one’s eyes as what Lacan calls the form of “consciousness, in its illusion of *seeing itself seeing itself*” (*Seminar XI* 82), only expands the dominion of the subject’s consciousness—the imaginary—rather than emphasizing the unsettling effects of the real gaze, which attacks this dominion from all sides. Along these lines, Lacan sought to “distinguish between the function of the eye and that of the gaze” (74). What exactly is this distinction?

In the theoretical frame elaborated above, the settler colonial gaze is a mastering look emanating from the settler’s eyes, appropriating images of Indigeneity and transforming them into images of itself. This framing of the gaze typically aligns with discussions of power, in the style of thinkers like Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, where the gaze exemplifies the desire for mastery and domination. As Todd McGowan summarizes, Nietzsche contends that the goal of desire is obvious, rather than ambiguous or uncertain: “we want mastery over the other or the object; we want to possess the alien object and make it a part of ourselves” (*The Real Gaze* 8). In works like *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault extends this line of thought through his work on

historical systems of visibility like the Panopticon, in which the gaze "serves as the perfect vehicle for this mastery" (*The Real Gaze* 8), enabling the pleasurable idea of seeing without being seen. Nevertheless, McGowan looks to reintroduce into these framings of the gaze as mastering a more fundamental submission located in Lacan's writing on the gaze. Therein, the gaze is viewed as a foreign object, rather than belonging to the subject. In the visual field, it appears only as the blank spot or screen in "the subject's seemingly omnipotent look…mark[ing] the point at which our desire manifests itself in what we see" (*The Real Gaze* 6). As an object, the gaze implicates the viewing subject in what they see, despite the subject's attempts at distancing or self-removal to attain its desired mastery. What the subject looks out upon is fundamentally distorted by the subject's self-removal from what they see. Rather than the gaze operating as an appropriation of the unseeable into the territory of the seeable, the Lacanian gaze pulls the seeable into the territory of the unseeable. Through this movement, the viewing subject momentarily loses all sense of mastery over the visual field. It is along these lines McGowan argues that in contrast to the power-oriented gazes of Foucault and Nietzsche, the Lacanian gaze "marks a disturbance in the functioning of ideology rather than its expression" (7). In other words, the real gaze of settler colonialism, as read through Lacanian theory, does not reproduce settler colonialism as a system of power relations, but more so indicates its point of impossibility.

The Indigenous screen object illuminates the political potential of this shift in understanding the gaze. Whereas the fascination of settler subjects with Indigenous peoples and texts is problematic, these screen objects work with this fascination to lure the viewer into an unsettling, anxious encounter with the impossibility of that for which they are looking. Garneau's theory of the screen object displaces the gaze from the settler subject to the Indigenous object, meshing with Lacan's theory. As McGowan explains, "Lacan's use of the term reverses our usual way of thinking about the gaze because we typically associate it with an active process… but as an object, the gaze acts to trigger our desire visually, and as such it is what Lacan calls an *objet petit a* or object-cause of desire" (5-6). Indigenous screen objects trigger scopic desire, only to interrupt this desire through the thickening of the screen through which the subject is attempting to look. The void behind this screen—the non-existence of the object for which the settler subject is looking, a vision of Indigeneity that would complement rather

than annihilate their ego—becomes overbearing. It gazes back at the spectator, seeing them in their desire rather than how they would like to be seen. By facilitating desire, screen objects compel the subject of settler colonialism to "submit to the process of fascination and cease to hold [themselves] at a distance from what [they] see" (*The Real Gaze* 13). By way of the suddenly opaque screen, the settler subject encounters the "the gaze [as] the point at which the subject loses its subjective privilege and becomes wholly embodied in the object" (*The Real Gaze* 7). The subject becomes implicated in what they are wanting to see.

What might this encounter entail at a political level? In Patrick Wolfe's influential characterization of settler colonialism, he posits it as a "a structure not an event" (qtd. in Coulthard 125), meaning that it is not so much a historical occurrence as an ongoing violence. This characterization moves against actions like former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology for the "sad chapter in our history" of residential schools (qtd. in "PM cites 'sad chapter' in apology for residential schools" n.p.). Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson describes this apology as expressing how "settler governance now needs… the presumed eventful-ness of colonialism" to both "treat" it "as a thing, as an event and then deny it ever happened, as it happens before your very eyes" ("Whither Settler Colonialism" 439-40), which Harper later did at the 2009 G20 meetings, claiming that Canada has "no history of colonialism" (qtd. in Simpson 439). Following this structural framing, this chapter does not seek to delineate various historical occurrences that together compose settler colonialism as an overarching phenomenon, but rather addresses settler colonialism as a persisting structure in the present, operating at the level of subjectivity through the production of cultural screens. In doing so, this chapter follows Teresa Brennan's psychoanalytic mode of historicizing in which:

> 'History', as the sense of the sequence of past events, is increasingly moulded by the extent to which a foundational psychical fantasy makes itself materially true, and by its consequent material effects on the individual psyches that entertain the fantasy. That is why grasping the fact that the fantasy has become a material narrative across time is so critical, if so difficult. It is critical in creating a monolithic view of history which has a material basis in the present… (qtd. in Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks 47)

Along these lines, Indigenous screen objects reshape concretized fantasy, by working within popular settler colonial narratives. They draw their viewer into an ideological position, and then jolt them out of this position.

The fantasies of settler colonialism are multifarious, involving both settler and racial desire. Iyko Day critiques Wolfe's "decoupl[ing] [of] race from settler colonialism" through his claims that they constitute "categorically distinct modalities of power" (106-7). For Wolfe, "the primary motive [of settler colonialism] is not race… but access to territory" (qtd. in Day 107), which Day objects to due to its evacuation of "the proprietorial nature of whiteness, one that led W. E. B. Du Bois to define 'Whiteness [as] the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen'" (107). Ultimately, Day contends that "racial dynamics are internal rather than external to the logic of settler colonialism in North America" (107). The centrality of whiteness to settler colonialism merits a turn to Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' deployment of Lacan to analyze race as a "regime of looking" (2) or "aesthetic practice" (19). Seshadri-Crooks argues that the signifier of Whiteness comes to stand for being itself to the subject of race (a universal subject position), engendering a pleasurable fantasy of wholeness or completeness. Yet, Whiteness is nothing but a cultural and historical invention, a "fraudulent signifier" (Seshadri-Crooks 21) with no signified. Consequently, the fantasy of whiteness runs parallel with "racial anxiety… produced in relation to the subject's encounter with the historicity of Whiteness" (Seshadri-Crooks 21), its non-ontological character.

Actively looking for marks of racial difference in the visual field secures this fantasy for the subject, propping up the systemic categorization of race, which is structured by the master signifier of Whiteness, "establish[ing] a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (Seshadri-Crooks 3). However, this active looking only operates at the level of the imaginary, a "*seeing* by the signifier" (Seshadri-Crooks 38) of Whiteness. At the level of the symbolic, "the subject of race is constituted as *seen*, the subject of the gaze, through a certain logic of the signifier" (Seshadri-Crooks 38). The signifier of Whiteness screens the social sphere and its participants, dividing them into racial categories, and bestowing a gaze of recognition for White-identified individuals. As Seshadri-Crooks elaborates, this "gaze promotes the fantasy of wholeness" and "thus causes desire, [being] the consummate version of the *objet petit a*, and more importantly… the object of the scopic drive" (60). Yet, the object *a* is an impossible

object, and thus anxiety is generated when the subject loses their fantasmatic distance from its impossibility.

Though Whiteness constitutes an important component to the logic of settler colonialism, collapsing settler colonialism into a racial dynamic ignores its particularity as a social structure, its own unique master signifier. The regime of visibility of settler colonialism bears a similar structure to the racial one outlined by Seshadri-Crooks, but with some modifications. Jodi Byrd posits that the "master signifier" (86) of settler colonialism is settler, with this signifier's "etymological roots" (as discussed by Lenape scholar Joanne Barker) suggestive of "'coming to rest,' 'finding a seat,' and 'reconciliation'" (84). As master signifier, settler "reproduces the structural binary antagonisms between settler and Native" in order so that the "indigene [must] account for the settler… make room and accommodate their desires, needs, and subjectivity—a condition that, ironically, has always been constitutive of colonialism" (Byrd 84). It becomes "difficult to disentangle the Indigenous from the settler" (Byrd 80), as the latter becomes "the ontological center" (86) of settler colonialism as a system of signification.

The Indigenous screen objects of this chapter disentangle Indigeneity from the settler, by redrawing the settler colonial visual field from one dominated by the desire for Indigeneity to one dominated by the drive for Indigeneity, articulating it as impossibility—in settler colonial society—rather than attainable object. For the settler, desire for Indigeneity transforms into anxiety at the sensation of proximity to the object of desire. This anxiety resembles what Eve Tuck and C. Ree call "settler horror" that "comes about as part of this management, of the anxiety, the looming but never arriving guilt, the impossibility of forgiveness, the inescapability of retribution" (642) as the curse of settler colonialism. To these subjects, Indigenous screen objects also offer a path forward, even if the subject must first go backward. In the anxious encounter with the gaze described by McGowan, "one finds the basis of one's being in the failure of ideology's master signifier rather than in its success… transform[ing] the ideological subject into a politicized and free subject" (*The Real Gaze* 17), by "allow[ing] spectators to look at themselves—and the prevailing symbolic structure—from the perspective of a void" (20). In following the fascinating lure of *Maliglutit* and *Injun*, the scopic desire of the settler subject meets its limit, and the subject must reassemble themselves around this limit.

Tangled Triangles of Vision

This section of the chapter lays down the possible coordinates of an encounter with the gaze in the visual field of settler colonialism. Through a four-part series of visual diagrams in Lacan's eleventh seminar, he details a progressive shift from the imaginary field of vision to the gaze of the real (*Seminar XI* 67-122). These diagrams operate similarly to Lacan's four-part series of graphs of desire, in which each "implies the retroactive changing of preceding forms" (Žižek, *The Sublime Object* 111). The imaginary field of vision is articulated in the first diagram, resembling a model of artistic perspective.

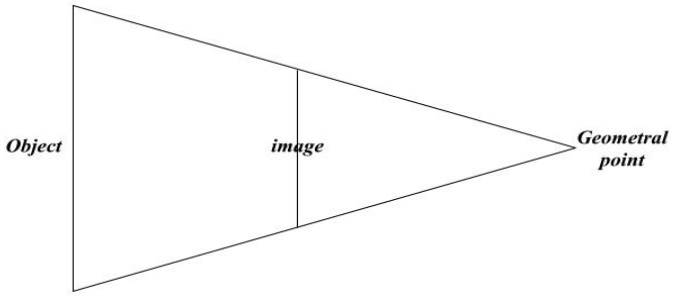

Figure 16: Lacan's First Diagram of Vision

Lacan calls this "geometral vision," something of an oxymoron since he argues that it is "vision in so far as it is situated in a space that is not in its essence the visual" (94). Instead, this vision is spatial in the sense that it signals the correspondence of one point to another in geometric space as accomplished in perspectival images. Providing a political gloss on this mode of vision, Hito Steyerl writes that "as the whole paradigm [of perspective] converges in one of the viewer's eyes, the viewer becomes central to the worldview established by it" and "this so-called scientific worldview helped set standards for marking people as other, thus legitimizing their conquest or the domination over them" (*The Wretched of the Screen* 19-20). For Steyerl, perspective's "reinvention of the subject" provided "an additional tool kit for enabling Western dominance," though "the spectator's importance is also undermined by the assumption that vision follows scientific laws" (19). As Lacan's second triangle suggests, vision instead follows the law of the unconscious.

For Lacan, the subject is "not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped" (96). If Lacan's first diagram

illustrates a taming of the gaze through the “function of images” (86), then the second diagram highlights the reason why the gaze needs to be tamed, in consideration of the dangers it contains for the subject.

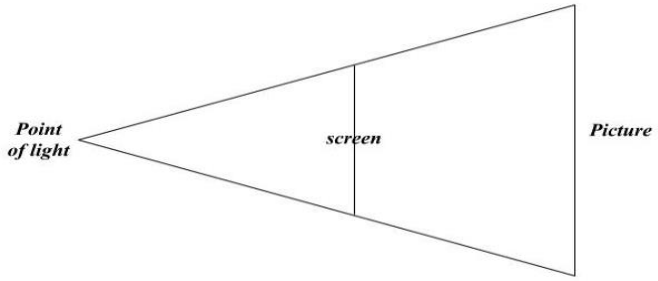

Figure 17: Lacan’s Second Diagram of Vision

Contrary to the “master[ing]” or “conquering” (94) of the visual object in the first diagram, this second diagram displays a new object, the point of light, which, with a reverse motion, threatens the eye of the Cartesian subject. Whereas light moves in straight lines in geometral vision, in this second diagram, Lacan isolates light in its substantial rather than geometric essence, sparkling with “the ambiguity of the jewel” (96). He writes:

> …[light] is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills—the eye is a sort of bowl—it flows over, too, it necessitates around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defences. The iris reacts not only to distance, but also to light, and it has to protect what takes place at the bottom of the bowl, which might, in certain circumstances, be damaged by it. The eyelid, too, when confronted with too bright a light, first blinks, that is, it screws itself up in a well-known grimace. (94)

Lacan is talking about the biological eye here but given that he at times substitutes ‘I’ for the eye, this passage also bears implications for the Cartesian subject, and how it can be momentarily annihilated by what it cannot process. The only way that the subject can locate themselves in this second diagram of vision is by mediating the point of light or lessening its blow—the failure in their visual field—through the screening function of the signifier, thereby assuming the visual form (the picture) dictated by this screen: “if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen” (97).

If the first diagram amounts to a depiction of the imaginary aspect of vision—as Alenka Zupančič relates, it “enables us to ‘imagine’ *everything there is to see*” (“Blind Man’s Buff” 34)—and the second triangle amounts to a diagram of the symbolic aspect

of vision—as Copejc argues, its domain is grounded by “semiotics, not optics” (34)—then it would follow the Lacanian paradigm that the third diagram offers a depiction of the real aspect of vision. The real of this final diagram is in the superimposition or interpenetration of the two triangles, the ways in which they are each tangled with the other. Though the subject of representation works to transform the object *a* as object-cause of desire into an object of desire through the image, the transformation is never complete, as the real of the gaze always threatens behind the image, rendering it also a screen.

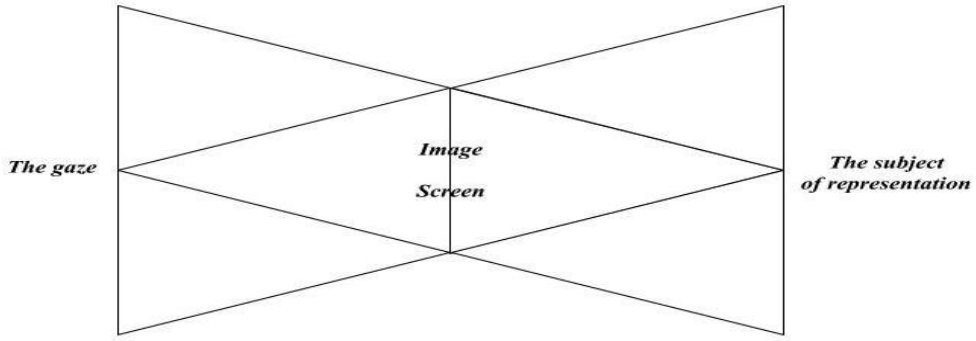

Figure 18: Lacan’s Third Diagram of Vision

In this territory of the real, it is useful to recall the initial reference around which Lacan begins his talking about the gaze: the Indigenous reserve. In seeking to discuss that which is visually inapprehensible for the subject—their involvement in perception—Lacan immediately asks his audience to understand this unconscious aspect of vision “in the sense of an Indian reserve” (68). What he means by this reference is that there is something excluded from “the social network” (68), like the spatial exclusion of the Indigenous reserve, which returns to it in the unwelcomed object-form of the gaze.

This reference appears to have not lost any relevance in the present day. As Métis scholar Warren Cariou writes, “indigenous spaces such as reserves and certain urban neighbourhoods like Winnipeg’s north end have essentially become blank spaces in the colonial imagination” in which settlers “don’t imagine these spaces as tantalizingly empty zones of potential wealth and possibility; instead, they don’t see them at all” (35). Cariou is not alone in pointing out the invisibility or social exclusion supporting the visual reality of settler colonialism. Similarly, Paulette Regan describes how despite the “imposing presence of the [Indian residential] school buildings that dotted [and continue to dot] the Canadian landscape,” they still “remain comfortably invisible to Canadians”

(5-6). Finally, Audra Simpson contends that the politics of recognition figured by GWF Hegel's master-bondsman dialectic—"I see you; you see me; this is reciprocal; this reciprocity signals justice" (*Mohawk Interruptus* 23)—are fundamentally distorted by the optics of the settler colonial state, producing a "*not seeing* that is so profound that mutuality cannot be achieved" (23). In sum, these quotes suggest that the real of Indigeneity continues to be singularly repressed from the settler colonial sphere of vision.

This continual unseeing prompts Glen Sean Coulthard to reject the politics of recognition of the settler colonial state. In his own critique of Hegel's master-slave dialectic of recognition, Coulthard focuses not on reconfiguring the subjectivity of "the master (the colonizing state and society)" but rather the subjectivity of the slave (the colonized), with his call for Indigenous peoples to "turn away" from "the objectifying gaze and assimilative lure of colonial recognition" (*Red Skin, White Masks* 43). To a significant degree, Coulthard achieves this position through a return to the theory of Frantz Fanon, centering Fanon's argument for the "self-recognition" of the colonized, along with Fanon's attachment to the negritude tradition despite its at times "essentialist character" (43). In doing so, Coulthard reckons with a key element of Fanon's challenge to the Hegelian slave-master dialectic, precisely that violent, material struggle constitutes its "perfect mediation" (Fanon qtd. in Coulthard 47). Though Coulthard (somewhat reluctantly) rejects Fanon's argument here, the concept of mediation largely drops out of *Red Skin, White Masks* thereafter, due to Coulthard's justified focus on exploring the complexities of Indigenous subjectivity, rather than settler subjectivity. By contrast, Indigenous screen objects productively bring the concept of mediation back into the struggle. It is important to note that unlike the negritude movement's potential for essentialism, these screen objects emerge from settler colonial sources, as opposed to imagining a pre-contact Indigeneity, and thus are necessarily mediatory.

To clarify, Indigenous screen objects are not mediatory in the sense of mediating between settlers and Indigenous people—a kind of conflict resolution—which is a process that only further entrenches the validity of the settler position to begin with. This process follows the model of the Hegelian politics of recognition, challenged by both Simpson and Coulthard. Instead, screen objects mediate the gaze which does not come from the other (a fellow conscious being) but from the signifier of Indigeneity in its function as screen. In his tenth seminar, Lacan similarly critiques Hegel's politics of

recognition for having no sense of “mediation but that of violence” since the theory is “too tightly focused on the imaginary” (*Seminar X* 24-5). Foreshadowing Coulthard’s argument, Lacan states that “it’s very nice to say that the slave’s servitude is brimming with the whole future right up to absolute knowledge, but politically this means that till the end of time the slave will remain a slave… one does have to tell it like it is once in a while” (25). Instead, Lacan shifts the gaze of recognition as coming not from a fellow “consciousness” but from the “un-consciousness” (23) of the signifier-screen. Though the subject desires recognition from this gaze, the gaze can never recognize the subject, and thus must be screened, instantiating both a fear of the gaze and desire for the gaze that structures the reality of the visual field. It is this form of mediation that is found in Lacan’s fourth and final diagram of the gaze. Through the Indigenous artwork’s screen function, it operates at what Lacan calls “the locus of mediation” (107), amounting to a seizure of the means of mediation.

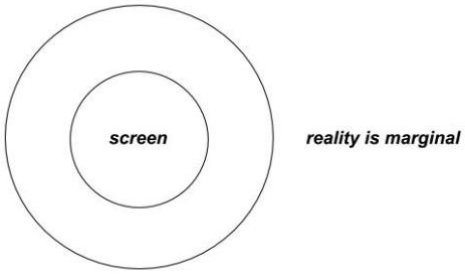

Figure 19: Lacan’s Fourth Diagram of Vision

The Screen of Ethan Edwards

From its beginnings, the Western as a genre has been likened to a collective fantasy. In *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (2014), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz identifies a split in the American imaginary that required a fantasmatic resolution. In crafting the national mythology required by the bid for independence, the values of democracy and equality that America wished to inaugurate itself with did “not fit well with dominance of one race by another, much less with genocide, settler colonialism, and empire” (Dunbar-Ortiz 103). Thus, an imaginary reconciliation was required, between “rhetoric and reality” (Dunbar-Ortiz 103), or, alternately, “empire and liberty” (106). Enter early eighteenth-century novelist James Fenimore Cooper and his series of five novels called the Leatherstocking Tales, including well-known titles like *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Each novel revolves around the character of settler

frontiersman Natty Bumppo, a prototype for future heroes of the Western genre. As Dunbar-Ortiz argues, these stories established an origin myth in which America became the "merger of the best of both worlds, the Native and the European," simultaneously featuring "the dissolving of the Indian [who] died off [naturally]" (107). For Dunbar-Ortiz, this contradiction and its impossible resolution constitute a "convenient fantasy [which] could be seen as quaint at best if it were not for its deadly staying power" (107). Instead, for the young, white, male readers of these novels who consumed them in the nineteenth century, the "novels became perceived fact, not fiction, and the basis for the coalescence of US American nationalism" (106). In accomplishing this feat, a "pattern of narrative" (107) for future writers of the Western was established, a how-to-guide for concealing the impossibilities of American ideology.

How exactly does the gaze fit in here to this fantasy-structure, or what exactly then is the gaze of the Western? Slavoj Žižek helpfully broadens the scope of the problem here with his more general argument that "fantasy is the primordial form of *narrative*, which serves to occult some original deadlock [by] rearranging its terms into a temporal succession" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 10-11). In *The Last of the Mohicans*, the last Mohican (signaling that the Indigenous peoples are at an end) hands "the continent over to Hawkeye, the nativized settler, his adopted son" (Dunbar-Ortiz 104), signaling that a new race, the American people, is at its beginning. Yet, what appears through fantasy to be a linear history constitutes a temporal loop, endlessly repeating. As Žižek notes, a price must be paid for these imaginary resolutions. Since "the narrative silently presupposes as already given what it purports to reproduce" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 11)—in the case of *The Last of the Mohicans*, the new race of the American people—it must generate "an impossible gaze, the gaze by means of which the subject is already present at the act of his/her own conception" (11). Such an impossible gaze is given a very literal representation in the Leatherstocking Tales. Dunbar-Ortiz relates how the tales "narrate the mythical forging of the new country from the 1754-63 French and Indian War in *The Last of the Mohicans* to the settlement of the plains by migrants traveling by wagon train from Tennessee" all the way to "Bumppo d[ying] a very old man on the edge of the Rocky Mountains, as he gazes east" (103). This final, eastward gaze amounts to a fantasmatic overcoming of the anxious look out toward the west as empty, "Indian Country" (Dunbar-Ortiz 106) at that time. In other words, it is a staged gaze, typical of what Žižek calls "the impossible neutral gaze of someone who falsely *exempts*

himself from his concrete historical existence" (18). This exemption, along with its accompanying impossible gaze, constitute the narrative impulse of the Western, and its concretization of a national fantasy.

So, how is this impossible gaze mediated in *The Searchers*, considered one of the greatest Western films of all time, as well as—coincidentally—the "most influential movie in American history" (*New York* magazine qtd. in Ebert)? It is mediated through a screen, which filters or censors the impossible gaze. The fantasy element in *The Searchers* is that this screen is presented as a visible thing, the walking answer to the question of the impossible gaze. It is John Wayne, playing Ethan Edwards. Ethan mediates the gaze—and accordingly, the visual fabric—of the film from beginning to end. The film opens with a shot of his sister-in-law, Martha (Dorothy Jordan), seeing him walking in from the desert, while gradually the rest of her family, including the dog, come out of the homestead to see him. With the wind blowing into the faces of Martha's children, Ben (Robert Lyden) and Lucy (Pippa Scott), it is almost as if seeing Ethan has physical effects.

Figure 20: Still from *The Searchers*

Between the film's end and beginning, the visual results of the various violent acts committed by the film's Comanche antagonists upon the settlers are seen only by Ethan. Some of the characters implore him to tell them what he's seen, or let them see as well, all of which he prohibits. "Did they…? Was she…?" Brad (Harry Carey Jr.) cries

to Ethan, concerning his kidnapped, raped, and murdered fiancé Lucy, to Ethan's blazing response: "What I've got to do—draw you a picture? Spell it out? Don't ever ask me! Long as you live don't ever ask me more!" This refusal to grant vision leads Brad, who can now only imagine, into a suicidal frenzy. Others ask him to see for them. "I'd like you to see them all… it might help us identify them," an American military commander requests of Ethan, speaking of the dead bodies of settlers killed by American soldiers in a raid on an Indigenous camp. Meanwhile, Ethan himself cannot be seen, specifically in a way that would place him within the events of American history. Instead, he exists merely as some rebellious outside, rebelling even against the rebellion. Upon meeting Ethan, Clayton (Ward Bond), the priest and sheriff of the film, says to him: "Haven't seen you since the [Confederate] surrender… Come to think of it, I didn't see you at the surrender." Ethan replies: "Nothing for you to see." That is because Ethan is more ahistorical than historical, a blot more than a character, distorting the film's visual field so that the others can continue to have eyes that do not see.

Unseeing eyes are made prominent in a scene in which Ethan shoots out the eyes of a dead Comanche warrior. In response to his friends' bewildered reactions, Ethan explains it was done so that the warrior "can't enter the spirit land but has got to wander forever between the winds." Yet, this fate assigned by Ethan to the Comanche returns to the settler community in their eyes' own unseeing, compelling a mechanical search for this visual loss as object. As the theme song of *The Searchers* by the Sons of the Pioneers goes: "What makes a man to wander? / What makes a man to roam? What makes a man leave bed and board, / and turn his back on home… Some men they search for injuns / Or hump-backed buffalo, / And even when they found them, / They move on lonesome slow… A man will search his heart and soul, / Go searching way out there, / His peace of mind he knows he'll find, / But where, oh Lord, Lord where?". Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks explains how "the Lacanian view about our general sense of visual reality or conscious perception is that it is itself subtended by our drive to search, recognize and recover the object of desire" so that "what we take to be the evidence of our eyes, the fruit of our active looking, is largely caused by an unrecognized and underlying need to encounter that which Lacan terms 'the gaze'" (59). As object *a*, the gaze emanates from the subject's lack, in this specific case the lack of reconciliation with the Indigenous of the land, and the land itself. As Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Taiaiake Alfred writes, settlers "have not yet rooted themselves and been transformed into real people of

this homeland" (38). Alternately, former Chief of the National Indian Brotherhood George Manuel claims how "*it is the insistence on the separation of the people from the land… that has prevented European North Americans from developing their own identity in terms of the land so that they can be happy and secure in the knowledge of that identity*" (12). Along these lines, settler colonialism's point of impossibility generates a continual desire and anxiety in the settler colonial subject. This lack of rooting is visually suggested by the settler homestead in *The Searchers* being bizarrely situated in the awe-inspiring though arid landscape of Monument Valley in Arizona, despite being in Texas within the film's diegesis.

It is by its demonstration of the extensive search for this impossible object that *The Searchers* documents what Richard Slotkin calls "structures of thought [that] produce a 'logic' which, if we accept and pursue it, traps us in cycles of violence and retribution without limit and beyond all reason" (461-2). Searching for an object that would resolve the settler colonial lack only necessitates more and more monstrous screens like Ethan that can block the impossibility of this task. Due to Ethan's blocking out of the unseeable, an encounter with the gaze becomes possible only by inspecting the traces it leaves upon Ethan's face, specifically in his look. Since he controls the film's visual field, other characters constantly read this look to try to escape the imaginary. In a pair of comments on the "look in [Ethan's] eyes," his brother Aaron (Walter Coy) questions why he stuck around the homestead; the hidden secret here is that Ethan is in love with his brother's wife, Martha. Later, Ethan's companion during the search, Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) questions him as to what will happen to the kidnapped Debbie (Lana Wood and Natalie Wood) when they find her; the hidden secret here is that Ethan plans to kill her since she has been tainted by living with the Comanche for years now. In being a screen, Ethan's look both conceals and reveals the real, in the process manipulating the real, as suggested by Slotkin: "its hatefulness signals a total repudiation of 'the horror' and its perpetrators… yet it also reproduces 'the horror': since the bodies are hidden, Ethan's expression is our only way of knowing (or guessing) what is there" (466). Ethan both conceals and reveals the horror of settler colonialism, thereby mediating it according to his own whims, ones that are therapeutic for the settler community of *The Searchers*, as well as potentially the film's audience.

Through Ethan's shifting perspective on Debbie, *The Searchers* formally refracts this social horror. As the object of the film's searching, Debbie comes to stand in for the

necessity of interrelations between Native Americans and settlers. The lone survivor of the attack on the settler homestead, Debbie becomes one of the wives of the Comanche Chief Scar during the seven years that pass while Ethan and Martin scour the landscape for her. As various characters proclaim, this means that she is no longer white and thus deserves to get "a bullet in her brain" as her cousin Laurie (Vera Miles) puts it. Accordingly, Ethan's pursuit of his niece (who could be his own daughter, given his close relationship with her mother, Martha) bears an "objective [which] gradually changes from 'search and rescue' to 'search and destroy'" (Slotkin 467). As Seshadri-Crooks articulates, "the prohibition against miscegenation" on display in *The Searchers* "ultimately serves to protect the paradox of Whiteness" which is that "it attempts to signify the unsignifiable" (45)—being itself—while being nothing but a historical invention. Seshadri-Crooks elaborates that this paradox generates the "fantasy of encountering Whiteness" (59), displayed in the climax of *The Searchers*, in which Ethan redeems Debbie as still being white, or intact. The climactic scene involves Ethan chasing down and seizing Debbie seemingly with the intent of murdering her—as her terrified face reflects—only to lift her in the air as he once lifted her as a child. It is also an encounter with Indigeneity, as Debbie is fully costumed in Comanche dress. Through Ethan's redemptive look, Debbie becomes a fantasmatic object in which the Indigenous and the settler can coincide.

Figure 21: Still from *The Searchers*

To conclude, Ethan's motivations for changing his mind remain ambiguous, but his decision is perhaps less interesting in its positive dimension than in its negative dimension. Despite deeply conflicted attitudes toward Debbie being expressed by the settlers who remained at home, there is curiously no decision for the settlers to make when Ethan finally brings Debbie home, as they universally celebrate her return. Debbie has in effect been visually reborn and purified by Ethan's redemptive gaze. This redemption of Debbie ultimately results in Ethan coinciding "with the 'gaze'… a piece of the Real, that could annihilate difference" (Seshadri-Crooks 59). It is in this climax of *The Searchers* that Ethan finally loses his status as the screen—and accordingly, his seething visual power—by assuming the completely fantasmatic position of the gaze, rather than mediating it any longer. The finding of Debbie by Ethan is followed by a scene in which the settlers all happily re-enter the homestead, gripping and directing Debbie inside. From her recovery to the film's end, Debbie is never relinquished from being held by someone, emphasizing her status as object, which she seems more alarmed by than happy in being rescued. With the imaginary wholeness of the homestead restored, Ethan is allowed to drift off into the desert as the screen fades to black. His mediation of the visual unconscious is no longer required; the fantasy has been secured. Yet, it must be continually secured, as suggested by the looping structure of the film, in which Ethan must eventually return from the desert to perform his task again.

The Impossible Object of the Searchers

Released 60 years after Ford's film, *Maliglutit* does not faithfully reproduce a successful search, but instead illustrates the impossibility of the search at the heart of *The Searchers*. The plot is similar in both movies: the protagonists' family members are kidnapped or murdered, and an ensuing desperate pursuit takes place after the perpetrators, on horseback in *The Searchers*, and by dog sled in *Maliglutit*. The fidelity to the source material largely ends here though. In *The Searchers*, the plot structure is driven by a violent racial dynamic between Indigenous peoples and settlers. By contrast, *Maliglutit* contains only Inuit characters, divided somewhat haphazardly into good guys and bad guys. This is not to say that settler colonialism is absent within the movie. *Maliglutit* can be viewed as the culmination of a series of visual meditations on settler colonialism spanning co-director Zacharias Kunuk's filmography. *Atanarjuat: The Fast*

Runner (Kunuk 2001) endeavours to capture the pre-contact culture of the Inuit, from hunting to songs to the building of igloos. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (Cohn & Kunuk 2006), represents contact in a documentary-like portrayal of the encounter between early European ethnographer Knud Rasmussen and the Inuk shaman, Avva. In *Maliglutit*, European contact shifts from the level of visual content to visual form, and documentary shifts to fiction. This development parallels Žižek's analysis of Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski's filmography, in which he transitioned from a documentary approach to a fictional one. Žižek clarifies how "it was precisely a fidelity to the Real that compelled Kieślowski to abandon documentary realism—at some point, one encounters something more Real than reality itself," involving that part of reality which must be "foreclosed" to constitute reality (*The Fright of Real Tears* 71). *Maliglutit* approaches this real through investigating the foreclosure at the heart of *The Searchers*.

Like *Atanarjuat*, European characters are absent in *Maliglutit*; at the same time, like *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, the film takes place during the first stages of European contact. However, the only gesture toward this contact in the film is through the representation of a diverse collection of objects acquired off screen through trade with Europeans. These objects often appear only in the background of the action, such as the characters' constant drinking of tea, cooking in pots, or eating from food cans clearly marked "IMPORT." Through this much more subtle evocation of contact, *Maliglutit* leaves many reviewers of the film confused as to the exact nature of its political commentary on *The Searchers*. Despite being an Indigenous remake of a problematic Western, reviewer Cian Cruise notes how *Maliglutit* curiously removes "the racial conflict at the core of Ford's film" (n.p.); Jay Kuehner similarly states that *Maliglutit* is "conspicuous for its absence of an Other, the axis upon which Ford's (ambiguous) moral tale is hinged" (n.p.); Chris Knight echoes these thoughts with his description of Kunuk's film as being "strictly about the Inuit" and not "tensions between the First Nations and European settlers" (n.p.). According to such reviews, the subtraction of explicit racial conflict appears to weaken the film's political message, which presumably might have been stronger if *Maliglutit* had simply reversed the conceit of *The Searchers*, featuring Inuit good guys pursuing European bad guys. Instead, it becomes viewed as a simple action film. This perspective on *Maliglutit* often emerges through an omission of the European presence in the film that appears in the form of the trade objects. In some reviews, these trade objects are ignored, producing sentiments like Norman Wilner's that

the film “could just as easily be [taking place] 1000” (n.p.) years ago. Yet at key points in the film, some of these trade objects assume prominent positions in the film’s plot, particularly the rifle. At the centre of the action, the theft of the family members is instigated by the overheard sound of the protagonist Kuanana’s (Benjamin Kunuk) rifle shot by the villains, this relatively new sound carrying for kilometres across the snowy landscape. Subsequently, Kuanana and his son Siku (Joseph Uttak) search for and ultimately kill the band of villains with both the rifle—containing only three bullets—and a telescope playing integral roles in the pursuit. Clearly, none of these events would have transpired in the same way a thousand years ago.

Among these objects, the telescope is the most prominent. It alone dictates the visual field of the film at key moments, enabling it to uniquely operate at the level of both content and form. Typical of *Maliglutit*’s combinatory style of featuring traditional Inuit practices alongside practices influenced by contact, a hunt begins with a traditional, shamanistic locating of the prey in terms of its direction from Kuanana’s igloo. In the hunt that follows, however, it is Kuanana’s acquisition of Western technology—the telescope—which ultimately locates the caribou. “There they are… do you see them?” Kuanana asks his son. “Yes… there… I can see them now,” Siku replies, after some maneuvering of the telescope’s angle. Along similar lines, the use of a shamanistic loon totem—representing the god Kallulik—initially sets the direction for the protagonists’ pursuit of the villains, but the telescope once again provides the finishing touches. Initially, the main villain, Kupak (Joey Sarpinak), perceives a glittering point of light in the snow-scape. It is the reflection of sunlight off the lens of Kuanana’s telescope. Rubbing the lens of his own telescope in disbelief, Kupak looks again more closely. “He’s looking back at me,” he states, gazing through his own telescope at the telescope-gazing Kuanana, who himself, in a reverse-shot, says as if in a trance, “there they are… there’s my wife.” In each of these scenes, the film deploys the telescope in similar fashion to Ethan’s controlling look, by restricting what is seen from the audience.

Curiously, the only two points at which the audience is allowed to see what the telescope sees involve death or at least impending death: human this time, not caribou. In the first of the telescope-framed shots, a villain is seen ambling haphazardly along before his imminent dispatching by the protagonist’s rifle. The metonymic connection of the telescope and the rifle here echo another film, *The Rules of the Game* (Renoir 1939). Stanley Cavell explains:

> After the [rabbit-hunting] shoot, but still within the shoot's locale, the action centers around a particular object, the small telescope or eye-piece. We are told or shown three main features of this object: it is fun, even fascinating; when you look through it, reality is suddenly revealed, or made accessible, in an otherwise unavailable manner; it is deadly, it penetrates to the inner life of living creatures.Omitting further detail, I will simply assert that the eye-piece is a sort of figure of speech, or synecdoche of sight, for both a gun and camera. (When the wife spies through it and sees her husband with his former mistress, this is already a kind of shooting accident.) (222)

Similarly, to be seen by the telescope is to be subjected to violence in *Maliglutit*. Yet, a more psychical rather than physical violence in *Maliglutit* emerges not from the telescope's enhancement of the subject's vision, but rather from what the telescope cannot see: the gaze.

In the second of the two telescope-framed shots in *Maliglutit*, Kuanana first sees that his igloo has been broken into. The composition of this shot is similar to Lacan's fourth diagram of vision, with the screen (the hole in the igloo) at its centre, and outside reality suddenly becoming marginal.

Figure 22: Still from *Maliglutit*

Given the seriousness of the situation, Kuanana's look through the telescope is unusual in that it does not frantically scan what it sees. Instead, the shot bears an unnatural steadiness, lingering at length on the scene as if transfixed by the dark hole torn into the side of the igloo. Within the telescope's enhanced field of vision, there is still something it cannot grasp. As the camera shifts out of the frame of the telescope, Kuanana assumes a more naturally frantic state, interrupted only by the careful putting away of his

telescope. The next shot reveals why the telescope was transfixed, as coming from the dark, impenetrable blot in its vision was another gaze, the gaze of the camera.

Figure 23: Still from *Maliglutit*

This shot shows what the telescope's masterful vision still could not see, that "things are looking at [it]" (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 109). It is the most still shot of the film, likely due to being established from inside the relatively camera-friendly confines of the igloo's warmth. This rare stillness in a film whose camera essentially captures one long chase sequence emphasizes the technological apparatus of the shot. Unmoving and unmoved, it watches the now approaching Kuanana as he enters the igloo and finds his family members dead, dying or stolen. Unlike *The Searchers*, *Maliglutit* vividly displays the dead and dying bodies, relocating the unseeable trauma elsewhere.

In contrast to Cavell's description of the shot from *The Rules of the Game*, which likens the telescope to the camera, this shot from *Maliglutit* separates the camera's vision from the telescope's vision. Plotting this shot/reverse-shot sequence onto Lacan's third diagram of vision helps illustrate this:

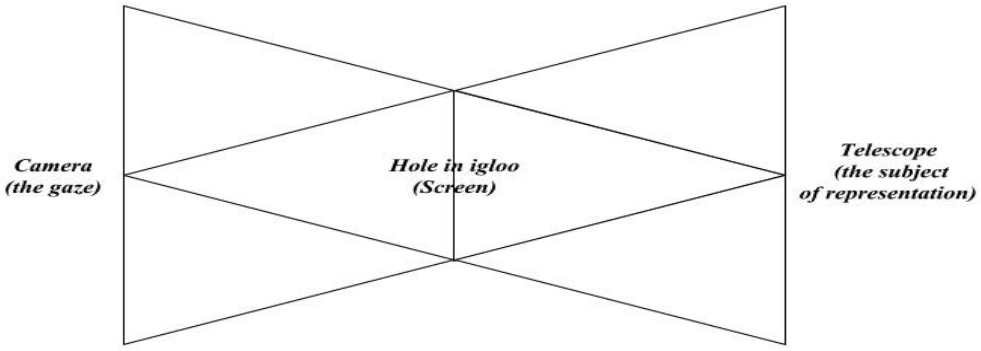

Figure 24: Diagram of Vision (*Maliglutit*)

The subject of the scene is not an effect of the telescope, or of the camera; rather, it is an effect of being trapped between these two superimposed fields of vision, in the form of the screen that mediates their traumatic intersection. In this case, the trauma is the protagonist's "world [being] torn apart" (opening narration) as he becomes a different subject following the revelation of what lies in the igloo. The protagonist's family members are what are lost during this scene, but there is also a visual loss in the telescope's sudden failure, and the protagonist's subsequent subjection to the camera's gaze. The desperate search of *Maliglutit* commences in the wake of this visual trauma, just as the search of its source material, *The Searchers*, commences with the bodies of the settlers whose viewing Ethan prohibits. Yet while the visual trauma of *The Searchers* is mastered and repressed by Ethan, *Maliglutit* locates its visual trauma in the real by splitting its viewing subject. Accordingly, while the finding of the lost object in *The Searchers* is framed as a triumphant climax, the finding of the lost object in *Maliglutit* is a comparatively desolate affair. In the film's closing shot, the gaze of Kuanana's retrieved wife (Karen Ivalu) is downcast, the daughter and son are absent, and the protagonist himself is shaken to the point of tears. What has been lost is not recoverable.

This trauma is represented as personal, but its initial pinning between the visual instruments of the telescope and the camera gives it a historical resonance. In the film preceding *Maliglutit*, Kunuk more directly addresses the historical legacy of Danish ethnographer Knud Rasmussen's documenting of the languages, cultures, and ways of life of the residents of the Arctic, including the Inuit, from 1921 to 1924. Nevertheless, *Maliglutit* still appears to be processing scenes from Rasmussen's *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (1969). Therein, just as the fateful encounter between the protagonist and the villains in *Maliglutit* begins with an overheard rifle shot, so too does Rasmussen's first encounter with the Inuit. After looking around for the source of the

sound, Rasmussen observes “a line of black objects [standing] out against the ice of the fjord. [He] got out [his] glass; it might, after all, be only a reef of rock. But the glass showed plainly: a whole line of sledges with their teams halted to watch the traveller approaching from the South” (*Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* 3). This historic meeting appears as a realization of Rasmussen’s desire. He becomes the first to “penetrate into unknown regions” through the overcoming of “natural obstacles [that] have hitherto proved an effective barrier” and encounters “the tribes of Eskimos, [that he] intended to visit uncontaminated by white civilization” (19). But its structure is in fact one of ruined desire, as a contaminated sound, a screen or stain of Indigeneity, blocks him from his object of desire. Far from an isolated incident, Smaro Kamboureli notes that this lacking encounter forms a “pattern of repetition” (“Opera in the Arctic” 4) within the report, as Rasmussen is searching with his glass not to see the real Inuit, but rather to “record” (7) an intact primitivity that might secure his identity as modern. This desire only reaches its limits when, contra the visual control of the glass, the object comes too close, such as the authentic dessert offered to him at one point by his Inuit hosts: “larvae of the caribou fly, great fat maggoty things served up raw… squirming on a platter like a tin of huge gentles” (*Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* 65-6). Rasmussen quickly retreats from his hosts after this visually unmediated encounter with the object of his desire.

While Rasmussen’s expedition was underway, Robert J. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, the first documentary film, premiered in New York in 1922. Like Rasmussen, Flaherty expressed a desire to show “the former majesty and character of [the Inuit], while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well” (qtd. in Menand). If Rasmussen’s telescope offered the opportunity to spy out an ideal, pre-contact Inuit, Flaherty’s camera offered the opportunity to reproduce such an idealized vision, capturing the Inuit between these two settler colonial ways of not seeing. If his Inuk subjects failed to match his desired level of authenticity, or “the shot didn’t work,” Flaherty was in the habit of asking them “to repeat what they were doing until he was satisfied” (Menand n.p.). Endeavouring to film a walrus hunt to show how the Inuit traditionally gathered food, Flaherty was faced with only one problem: the Inuit being filmed no longer hunted walruses. The result was Nanook and his family “struggling to drag a harpooned walrus out of the Arctic surf and begging Flaherty to shoot it with his rifle [though he] pretended not to hear them and kept filming” (Menand n.p.). Clearly, Flaherty preferred to shoot it with a different kind of weapon. In Fatimah

Rony's words, such ethnographic practices attempt "to make that which is dead look as if it were still living" (101). Contrary to Cavell's evocation of the rifle, telescope, and camera as linked conveyors of death, the (ethnographic) camera is here elevated over the other two instruments in its capacity to confer a living death. *Maliglutit* sets itself against this living death by assuming a position behind the camera, as screener of the real, rather than screened by the reel.

To conclude this section, a major formal element of *Maliglutit* involves interlude scenes foregrounding the opaqueness of a screen. Containing narrative voice-overs, these scenes feature a pair of Inuit throat singers visible only as shadows dancing across an animal skin. The withheld elements here are not the death and violence of settler colonialism that Ethan represses in *The Searchers*, but rather the life and art that settler colonialism has equally repressed, such as the century-long banning of throat singing.[13] The gaze of the real in *The Searchers* emanates from the violence that must remain visually foreclosed from settler society; the gaze of the real in *Maliglutit* emanates from the life and art that has remained visually foreclosed from settler society, but is now experiencing resurgence. In an interview with *POV Magazine*, Kunuk recounts how after his family was forced to relocate to Igloolik by the government in 1966 so that he could attend a Canadian residential school, he "loved to see the movies" so much that he "used to cry for quarters" to go see them (qtd. in Glassman & Wolfe n.p.). Yet, he says that "at that time, we didn't know about how the system worked… everything felt like [it was] god-sent" (qtd. in Glassman & Wolfe n.p.). Working through settler colonialism's production of the visible, Kunuk manages to return some of that effect of its images being god-sent, but now, assuredly, from different gods.

From Desire to Drive for Indigeneity

The opening lines of Jordan Abel's *Injun* represent the contemporary concealment of Indigeneity: "he played injun in gods country / where boys proved themselves clean" (4). Later, the poem reads: "you can see it for yourself / let's play injun / and clean ourselves / off the land (14). These lines evoke the cover-up described by Robyn Taylor-Neu as "a popularly lauded Indigenous artistic 'renaissance'" in Canada

[13] I discuss throat singing in more depth in a chapter in *Lacan and the Environment* (2021), focusing particularly on Inuk musician Tanya Tagaq, who created the soundtrack for *Maliglutit*.

that “rests in part on the capacity of Indigenous authors, visual artists, and performers to ‘play Indian’ in ways that are legible under the rubric of liberal multiculturalism” (121). In Taylor-Neu’s estimation, this artistic renaissance is mobilized by the Canadian media to prop up a “liberal multicultural fantasy of reconciliation, which operates through an ideal of difference incorporated” (121). As the above lines from *Injun* suggest, this politics of recognition comes with material injury, as the settler colonial state continues its drive for land by resituating activist politics within the cultural field. Yet, Garneau’s theory of the screen object outlines how this “play[ing] injun,” though part of a violent history and present, can also be a tool of resistance, resituating the cultural field within an activist politics. *Injun* inhabits Indigeneity as a cultural screen, shifting the real concealed behind the screen. An object of desire in the 91 western novels that Abel works with, Indigeneity is transformed into an object of drive. Like in *Maliglutit*, the impossibility of the settler colonial search for Indigeneity is demonstrated, and Indigeneity becomes an aim or direction rather than a goal or endpoint for the poetic subjectivity of *Injun*.

The book’s cover offers the first indication of the text’s visual politics, featuring a work from Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore’s “Gone Indian” installation for Toronto’s 2009 Nuit Blanche. Belmore gazes back at the viewer from behind the screen of a stereotypically authentic Indigenous person. The pierced eyeholes of Belmore’s mimeographed mask appear as dark spots, obscuring the precise position of Belmore’s eyes. The spectator senses something is looking at them, but they are not sure from whom or where the gaze comes. In an interview, Abel explains the selection of Belmore’s photograph in tandem with his publisher as a wish to find an image that “looks back at the reader” (qtd. in Boan n.p.). Importantly, it looks back at the reader from both a screened position of hypervisibility (a spectacle of Indigeneity) and invisibility (the unknown presence lurking behind the mask).

Injun generates a comparable effect, particularly in its “Appendix” section. In this section, Abel displays the source text for *Injun* in its entirety: 26 pages of search results for the term “injun” within Abel’s dataset of 91 western novels, mined from Project Gutenberg. Yet, “Appendix” does not merely present a data dump of racist images. Instead, there is a clear editorial mark, with the very term for which the source text was searched being erased. This censoring of the slur recalls the psychoanalytic theory in which “censorship keeps the [unconscious] complex at a distance as long as possible by a succession of fresh symbolic screens, displacements, innocent disguises, etc.” (Carl

Jung qtd. in Freud 349). So that the settler state can continue to believe in its self-image, the horror of its attitude toward the Indigenous—represented here in the obscene slur—must be continually repressed by all. The effect of the omission of the search term is like that of Belmore's photograph, in which holes are cut in a stereotypical image of Indigeneity and the artist gazes back at the spectator from a position of invisibility. Paradoxically, the search term of "injun" becomes both invisible—being erased—and simultaneously more visible, its prevalence in the source text perceptibly marked by blank spots in the wall of text. "Appendix" depicts what Eve Tuck and C. Ree call "settler colonialism [as] the management of… those that had been destroyed, but also those that are generated in every generation" (642), meaning the shapeshifting image of the Indigenous person within the historical trajectory of settler colonialism. The shift that "Appendix" marks within this trajectory is merely the erasure of the obscene slur, with all the surrounding context, or conditions of representation, remaining intact, undisturbed. It is this blankness between the words that the poetic subjectivity of *Injun* must inhabit out of necessity.

There are further clues to Abel's poetic methodology in this section's naming. The Oxford English Dictionary defines appendix etymologically as "that which is attached as if by being hung on," echoing Abel's lines from the opening long poem: "injun s mu st hang / straight / bl ack arrows / o ff their / sh oulders" (17). These images hang onto the poetic subject of *Injun*, dragging them down into an imaginary identity. In the print culture sense, appendix means "an addition subjoined to a document or book, having some contributory value in connection with the subject matter of the work, but not essential to its completeness" ("appendix, *n.*"). Both senses appear slightly contradictory to the function of Injun's appendix, for it contains the poem's "source text" (83), opposing the connotations of the appendix being only supplementary, contributory, accompanying, etc. The semantic tension between source and appendix captures how the 91 western novels are both the necessary material of the creative work, but also a burden, a weight of limiting images. *Injun* works within this tension, transforming the source material into supplemental material, much like how a dream takes images from everyday life and renders them beautifully strange, making reality feel secondary to the dream.

These tensions between the book's various sections ("Injun," "Notes," "Appendix," "Sources," and "Process") recall the bibliographic complications of Tuck and Ree's essay. Relevantly, Tuck and C. Ree frame their own writing as a screen, dictating

what can be seen and what cannot by their reader: “I care about you understanding, but I care more about concealing parts of myself from you… I am using my arm to determine the length of the gaze” (640). The academic or detached style of *Injun*’s organization, lending the work a certain impersonality, can be read as a similar mode of defence, though one that also implicates the impersonality of academic studies of Indigeneity more broadly. Further into their text, Tuck and Ree present a glossary of terms “without its host—perhaps because it has gone missing or it has been buried alive, or because it is still being written,” thus granting the missing host “an appendix, a remnant, which is its own form of haunting, its own lingering” (640). Tuck and Ree’s metaphor of bibliographic haunting is useful for understanding Abel’s organization of *Injun*. The poem is both haunted by its source text—a burden that must be dragged around—but simultaneously, the poem haunts the source text, possessing its lifeless images of Indigeneity with an uncanny vitality. It is with good reason then that the final term that the “Notes” section examines is “possession” (58), with *Injun* amounting to a repossession of the images of Indigeneity found in the novels.

To track this haunting, what exactly is the source of the source text? The answer is two-fold, split between the analogue and digital versions of the 91 novels under examination in *Injun*. Christina Turner describes Abel’s “base materials [as] texts that we now tend to view as outdated (and inaccurate) portraits of Indigenous peoples, works that have not aged well and yet were vastly influential in their time” (n.p.). Yet the advent of open access and digitization grants these texts a second life. To give some impression of their revitalization, I compiled a dataset of the Goodreads reviews of Abel’s source texts, amounting to a total of 285 pages in Microsoft Word. These pages include twenty-four mentions of Kindle, twenty-three mentions of Project Gutenberg, nineteen mentions of LibriVox, twelve mentions of ebook, and seven mentions combined of GoogleBooks, the Internet Archive, and manybooks.net. More anecdotally, many reviewers expressed having read Abel’s source texts largely because they were free and accessible, such as one reviewer speaking of author Max Brand: “I will probably read more of his books in the future since they are mostly available for free for the Kindle” (Jody). Regardless of how outdated these western dime novels are, they are still active in the public’s envisioning of Indigeneity and settler colonialism, re-activated in part by their passing out of copyright and into openly accessible online archives. They are given a second life, and the Indigenous people represented therein a second death.

Speaking to this contemporary relevance of the source text in an interview, Abel describes how: “these novels… put up a wall around how we could think about this particular time period, the settlement period. It’s very necessary to return to these kinds of narratives” (Abel qtd. in Rooney). Abel speaks more of what his mode of return consists of: “I work with appropriated text because it brings me closest to the subject matter. There is a barrier there between me and what I really want to talk about, which is the primary document” (Abel qtd. in Rooney). In Abel’s poetics, the wall of these texts becomes more ambiguous, being both a site of restriction, blocking him from what he wants, but also one of productive encounter, in bringing him closest to that with which he wants to work. Thinking with the metaphor of the wall, Abel’s artistic methodology can be compared to the classical tale of a painting competition in Ancient Greece between Zeuxis and Parrhasios.

As Lacan relates, Zeuxis paints upon a wall a bowl of fruit in which grapes are so deceptively produced that “even the eye [of] birds was taken in by them” (*Seminar XI* 103). In the tale, a bird flies into the wall upon which the fresco is painted, dazzling the competition’s audience. Parrhasios, by contrast, covers his own painting with a veil, so that an impatient audience and Zeuxis finally demand of him: “Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it” (Lacan 103). Yet, Parrhasios insists that he cannot, until both Zeuxis and the audience realize that the veil upon the wall is the painting. Through this greater trickery, Parrhasios wins the competition by drawing attention to the structure of his audience’s looking. Placing this tale in dialogue with Abel’s work, the 91 novels present an Imaginary Indian through which settler eyes are willingly deceived, operating in the visual mode of Zeuxis. By comparison, *Injun*’s “Appendix” presents a screen of Indigeneity in the form of textual blank spots, operating in the visual mode of Parrhasios. The audience of *Injun* may expect the screen of the source text to be pulled back to reveal a real image of Indigeneity behind it. Yet the screen being the final image is more troubling, implicating the overly probing look, rather than offering it some novel image of Indigeneity. Through the barrier of the veil, *Injun* demonstrates the limits of this look, the impossibility of what is being searched for.

Nevertheless, a tale of painting does not sufficiently address the digital methodologies that Abel employs to create *Injun*, adapted from the academic field of the digital humanities. Therein, expansive corpuses of texts are scoured with various digital tools, as academics with the help of computers search for relations between words,

texts, authors, and genres, previously hidden to the human eye. Just as *Injun* chooses to address the western genre not by looking at one novel but 91, digital humanities institutes like the Stanford Literary Lab address genres like the gothic not by looking at only *The Castle of Otranto* but instead a corpus of 250 gothic novels. For the Stanford Literary Lab, the increasing digitization of literary texts produces the "euphoria [of] having a telescope that makes you see entirely new galaxies" (Algee-Hewitt et al. 1). Frequently, this increasing availability of digitized text has been figured as *terra nullius* for the extraction of insights pertaining to the literary record of Western civilization. Matthew Jockers deploys an unfortunate metaphor in describing: "the sudden motivation for scholars to engage in digital humanities [as] more than likely a direct by-product of having such a wealth of digital material with which to engage… with apologies to the indigenous, I must acknowledge here that the streets of this 'new' world are paved with gold and the colonizers have arrived" (11-12). Within this new textual landscape, historical modes of settler colonial looking are often reproduced. Along these lines, digital humanities scholars like Roopika Risam point to how the "digital humanities [have] contributed to the epistemic violence of colonialism and neo-colonialism" (80). Rather than offering a new sort of vision (as the novelty of the computational approach suggests), the digital humanities bear the potential to reify instead a very old sort of vision.

With its approach to the digital humanities, *Injun* indirectly follows Johanna Drucker's challenge to the representational methodologies of the digital humanities with what she calls "a non-representational approach" to data visualization (248). Rather than massive textual corpora simply being reduced into revealing visualizations, Drucker advocates for the digital humanities to illuminate what she describes as the agential interface between textual data and representation, or alternately, "the screen [as] as a primary site of work [where] interpretation is enacted" (252). Of further relevance to Abel's overarching poetic project, Drucker explains how she reconfigures textual visualization through the fields of "critical cartography and non-representational geography [in which] the term non-representational is used to suggest that a map may not precede experience or a phenomenological engagement with landscape and its features, but instead may be made as an inscription of experience" (251). In a similar vein, Abel's poetic trajectory shows a sustained interest in critical cartography. The preceding work to Injun, *Un/inhabited* (2014) employs the same source text as *Injun*,

which is visually converted in the former into map-like shapes. Likewise, Abel's art installation "Cartography (12)" at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver rearranges the same source text into a map of Burrard Inlet on whose shores the gallery is located. In this latter work, two modes of settler colonial visual representation intersect: cartography and the western novel. The particularities of the representations are difficult to reconcile into an easy convergence: how do American western novels relate exactly to a map of Vancouver's space? The representations do not so much converge at a positive level, as merge in their mutual inability to represent Turtle Island.

Taken together, "Cartography (12)," *Un/inhabited* and *Injun* do not just challenge representations of Indigeneity, but instead challenge the promise of new representations of Indigeneity to remedy the settler colonial system of visibility. If the western genre is a fantasy, as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz contends, then it is also like a dream; both psychic structures operate at the level of the unconscious. Consequently, if the western genre is still influential in shaping the settler colonial system of visibility, then it cannot be combatted at the level of conscious vision, but only at the level of the unconscious. Commentating on Freud's theory of dream vision outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan writes how Freud focuses on the "counterpart" (60) of representation, meaning vision as it is experienced in the dream, where "the subject does not see where it is leading" (75), but rather only follows as if by "remote control" (115). Adapting Freud's theory to artistic practice, Lacan pushes forward an aesthetic theory that involves the artist generating a state of dreamlike vision, based on a certain not seeing, rather than seeing. As Lacan writes, the "function of the [artist] is something quite different from the organization of the field of representation" (110). Taking as an example the painting of Paul Cézanne, Lacan describes how his brushstrokes "fall like rain" (110) like how a bird lets "fall its feathers, a snake [casts] off its scales, a tree [lets fall] its leaves" (114). In *Injun*'s "Process" section, Abel details a similar artistic practice for creating the long poem in which he cuts up the search results "without looking," "rearranges the pieces until something sounded right," or "just writes down how the pieces fell together" (83). These methodologies each mark a visual response to something unseeable in the scene of the search results, with varying degrees of conscious control allowed to the poet. The poetic subjectivity of the work becomes dream-like, a dream of Indigeneity rather than a primary document, one in which the viewer can only follow where they are being led.

The Screen of Search

This chapter's conclusion links its argument more directly to overarching themes of the dissertation, through a framing of Abel's artistic trajectory as a form of searching—a drive for Indigeneity—that today's digital search technology cannot handle. In Abel's most recent book, the genre defying *Nishga* (2021), he describes how his first work, *The Place of Scraps* (2013), began with the "deep down pain your heart kind of hurting" from an "aware[ness] of the hole in his life where Nisga'a knowledge and understanding belong" (41). To deal with this hole, Abel "went off to the library and… started to look for books using the search term *Nisga'a*" and the "first book [he] found was *Totem Poles* by Marius Barbeau" (43). Yet, rather than filling the hole, a trauma caused by Abel being "an intergenerational survivor of Residential Schools" (46), Barbeau's work only painfully reinscribed the gap between Abel and Nisga'a culture, the experience amounting to him "having no choice but to learn about [his] own family history through the now-debunked work of a dead, white anthropologist" (46), being "forced to search for Indigenous knowledge through Marius Barbeau because of the ways in which intergenerational trauma has impacted [his] ability to connect directly with members of [his] community" (78). This failure of the search result repeats in *Nishga*. After finding out the name of the residential school to which his grandparents had been sent, Abel "looked up all the records that were available through the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation… remember[ing] searching through hundreds of photos with no way of knowing which anonymous child was [his] grandmother, which anonymous child was [his] grandfather" (174). The system of digital search, despite its abundance of accessible results, ultimately reinscribes the hole rather than filling it.

To turn to the final failure of the search result in *Nishga*, there is a Google search for "how to kill yourself" (191), with pages of results that follow. These results steadily blur, then sharpen into photographs of the residential school Abel's grandparents attended. A suicidal impulse returns to its cause, with Abel attempting to deal with his past as structured by settler colonialism. Yet, this alternative search still arrives at another screen, just like the Google search screen, but now a photographic screen. The photographs suggest opacity in being taken of the plaques that commemorated the building of the residential schools (the laying of the "stone"), plaques which are set against a background of resolute bricks. The past is bricked up. Abel's search continues

to arrive at screens, which is perhaps the key result of his poetic project. In this way, his search moves beyond finding. Rather than attempting to bypass the screen, it is from the site of the screen that Abel's search emerges. Many of the graphic images in *Nishga* layer different screens upon each other: rewritten settler colonial textual sources like those contained in *Injun*, visual art of Abel's father, and Abel's own visual art. It is via the screen that the real of Indigeneity comes through in Abel's work.

Conclusion: Google Versus Psychoanalysis

Thomas Svolos reports that "it is not at all unusual to see analysands adopting symptoms that they hear about… from internet searches" (81). Lines from a poem by Gabby Bess document this internet behaviour: "GOOGLE SEARCH HISTORY: WEBMD FIBROMYALGIA, WEBMD LUMPS IN THROAT, WEBMD THROAT CANCER, HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE THROAT CANCER, LIKE, FOR REAL?" (326-7). Speaking of symptoms adopted from the internet, Jamieson Webster discusses in a podcast interview how Google enables an epistemological frenzy involving the subject's "search for the body, [their] search for knowledge, [their] search for certainty, [their] search for feeling" ("Conversion Disorder"). As Webster describes, "we have a question and we instantly Google, and we can't stop, and we go into these holes of googling things, where information is crowding into this space of the sexual question that we have about ourselves." This searching might not be as orientated toward the dissolution of symptoms as to their calcification. As Russell Grigg states, "the search for the truth of the symptom feeds the symptom" (qtd. in @lacancircle). Google searches offer a way of bypassing the truth of the symptom as structure rather than as content. In Slavoj Žižek's writing on the symptom, he defines it as "a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject" in which the "the subject can 'enjoy his symptom' only in so far as its logic escapes him" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 16). In this sense, Google offers possible symptoms for adoption at the level of the individual, but the social symptom is googling itself, through which the user avoids the truth that searching for knowledge is more enjoyable than finding a lack of knowledge in the Other.

Ed Finn frames Google as an "algorithmic quest for universal knowledge" that "mirrors and feeds our own eternal hunger for self-knowledge and collective awareness" (49). Even if users already "interact with search interfaces in intensely private ways—a strange, occasionally grotesque confessionalism at the altar of computation," Finn suggests that future success for Google's quest involves achieving "a much deeper intimacy with [its] human collaborators, [who are] pursuing the desire for knowledge of the self" (74-5). However, what if Google has already achieved a far more pervasive intimacy with its human collaborators, one in which it mirrors and feeds not the subject's desire to know, but their desire not to know? What if we Google not to find but because we fear finding? As Lacan states about the subject of psychoanalysis, "there has been

no desire for knowledge but… a horror of knowing" (qtd. in McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have* 17). Elaborating upon Lacan's statement, Todd McGowan explains that "knowledge and desire are at odds: the subject doesn't want to know what it desires or how it enjoys" as the permanent "gap within knowledge is the trigger for the subject's desire and the point at which it enjoys" (*Enjoying What We Don't Have* 18). Along these lines, Google does not aim so much at the attempted closure of the gap within human knowledge (as described by Finn), but rather the opening of gaps in knowledge, giving rise to the persistent link between Google and conspiracy theories. It is through the prospect of holes within knowledge that Google triggers the user's desire to search, providing a search engine that promises to fill these holes. But the search engine amounts to just one long hole, an endless tunnel chiseled into the internet.

Google does not facilitate so much a quest for knowledge as the occlusion of the gap of knowledge that founds the subject, allowing the subject to continue to search endlessly for an answer to their desire, a search from which the subject derives surplus enjoyment. As McGowan notes, "our quest for knowledge serves as a guise for a more fundamental quest for satisfaction" (25), in which the search is always more pleasurable than the result. The Other, whose role Google performs through the function of the subject supposed to know, does not hold an answer to the subject, as the subject instead emerges through a hole in the Other. Solving the dilemma of the subject supposed to know not truly knowing, Google generates a multiplicity of subjects supposed to know. If one search result is found lacking, the user can move onto the next, while enjoying being in the thrall of the subject supposed to know as function, thereby concealing the hole in the Other. Google refuses to give up the function of the subject supposed to know—the concealer of the Other's lack—as this position is intensely profitable. Users do not want to know anything about the Other's lack or their own lack, and that is why they Google. Users search for subjects supposed to know, and they find either certified experts and mainstream news or conspiracy theorists and alternative news. Though both positions are valued in certain social spheres over the other, Google renders them structurally similar, as suggested by this viral meme:

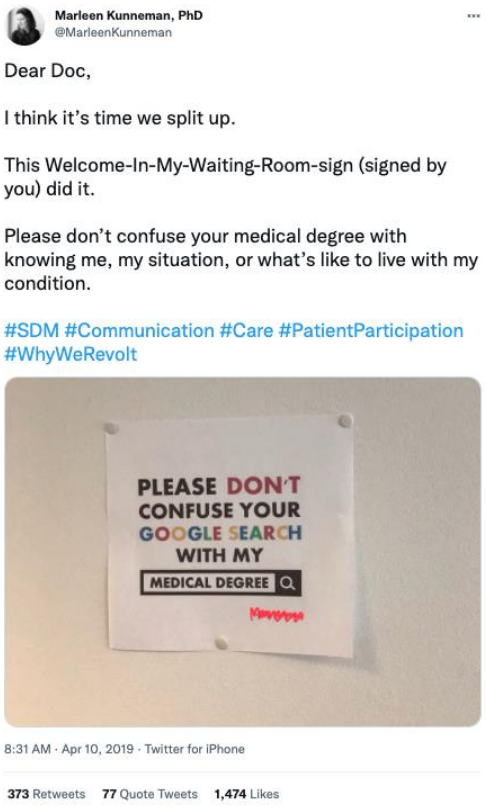

Figure 25: Screengrab of @MarleenKunneman Twitter post

Visually, the expert position is also framed as a Google search, suggesting the underlying premise of "please don't confuse your Google search with my Google search," an indication of where discourse is headed. Whether searches arrive at CNN News or Alex Jones, the searchers are all part of a more general condition described by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun as the collapse of a universal figure of the Other (e.g. God), leading to users being "caught in the plane of meaning and constantly seeking to compensate for the lack of authority through smaller *imaginary* ones" (*Control and Freedom* 270). Similarly, Jodi Dean writes how in the wake of the big Other's collapse, "we cannot know certainly; we cannot know adequately [but] we can mobilize this loss, googling" becoming "captured because we enjoy" (121) the search. In this way, Google rebuilds the big Other as a series of little big Others.

What does psychoanalysis do differently? Dany Nobus and Malcolm Quinn write that "however much an analysand may be engaged in a search for knowledge, the analyst needs to avoid assisting him in the realization of this task" with "the analytic position [being] geared towards the 'fall of knowledge', which implies that the search for

(better, truthful) knowledge is turned against itself, in the direction of an emergent nonknowledge" (22). Through this nonknowledge (the negativity of the Other not having an answer for the subject) the subject can separate from their dependence on the Other, traversing the fantasy of the Other's answer. In the digital era, this separation involves traversing the search result as a solution for desire. Psychoanalysis aims toward such a traversal not through informing the analysand that the Other's knowledge is ultimately unstable and inconsistent, but rather through an act of performance in the clinical space. At first, Nobus and Quinn note how "the analysand himself may lament the traumatic absence of knowledge about his condition, invest the analyst with epistemic superpower or what Lacan called the function of the 'supposed subject of knowing'" (22). The analyst must first occupy this position convincingly for the analysis to be successful, allowing the subject to work on their relationship with the Other through the figure of the analyst. Yet eventually the analyst gives up this position. While the subject's questions of "who am I?" and "what do I want?" constitute a goldmine for Google, Žižek contends that they represent a "trap the analyst has to avoid," an avoidance that amounts to a "strategy… to undermine" the place of the subject supposed to know "and to make the patient aware that there is no guarantee for one's desire in the big Other" (*How to Read Lacan* 39). The psychoanalyst forfeits their position as subject supposed to know, allowing the analysand to engage the hole in the Other from which they are formed, and to encounter the unconscious as subject supposed to know.

To be more specific as to how this is accomplished, Bruce Fink explains how at first "the analysand generally feels the need to be supported or propped up to some extent" by the analyst, but eventually this supporting function "gives way before the analyst as an actor, a function, a placeholder, a blank screen, or a mirror" (*A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 14). With a similar metaphor, Adrian R. Price writes that the analyst "occupies the place of the screen, sometimes blank, sometimes reflecting, sometimes allowing transparently the symbolic to work its grip on the real, and punctually swivelling the frame to afford a momentary appreciation of the mechanics by which the analysand's reality is virtually constituted" (n.p.). The analyst initially acts as a mirror in which the subject can imagine finding the answer to their being, but this mirror becomes a screen, one that conceals a void, thereby revealing the structure of what the subject is searching for in the Other. Though both Fink and Price employ the metaphor of the screen to describe analytic practice, Price points out that this virtual screen is

completely distinct from the digital screen: “it is paramount to distinguish between the virtual screen of the Other and the technological screen, which is more properly a filter and a prosthesis designed for compressed simulation” (n.p.). For Price, the “interposition of an electronic monitor is unthinkable in the analytic praxis” (n.p.), as it would presumably co-opt the analyst’s positioning as the screen. Contra Price’s absolute separation of the virtual screen of the Other from the digital screen, this dissertation maintains that there is a dialectical relationship between the virtual screen and the material screen. Rather than being totally distinct from the analytic screen, the digital screen can at times come into momentary alignment with it, leading to moments of analysis. The digital screen can, just like the analyst, constitute “a point of address that harbours an odd or end of the real” (Price n.p.). Sometimes the digital screen can be a sardine can.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Megan Boyle searches through the digital screen for answers to who she is and what she desires. At times, the digital screen functions as a mirror, in which Boyle sees herself. Eventually, the digital screen performs the analytic function described by Price of appearing as “sometimes blank” (n.p.). Boyle attempts to screenshot the reflection of her face and is surprised to find herself not captured, prompting a realization of her own status as nonreflective subject. Alternately, the digital screen is shown as “sometimes reflecting” (Price n.p.) in Chapter 2, in a way that surprises the subject rather than stabilizing them as digital reflections typically do. Alice Hare “looks down into the dark screen” of her phone for a message from Mizuko Himura, then sees her “own face reflected back at her” (371). In a moment of analysis, the digital screen reveals that Alice is projecting herself onto Mizuko. Despite one novel featuring the mirror becoming a screen and the other a screen becoming a mirror, both events constitute analytic encounters, in which a sudden modification of the virtual screen of the Other takes place through the digital screen.

Moving through Price’s taxonomy of actions that the analytic screen performs, Chapter 3 sees the digital screen “allowing… the symbolic to work its grip on the real” (Price n.p.) through how the characters of the three films address death’s real through the symbolic actions enabled by the digital screen: attempting to memorialize a dead friend’s Facebook account in *Unfriended*, texting with Unknown in *Personal Shopper*, and “hiding from search results” a loss in *Searching*. Challenging the characters’ manipulation of death through the digital screen, the specter acts as analyst, revealing

how the real which the users are addressing cannot be contained by their symbolic gestures. The specter as analyst is fitting since Rik Loose describes how the psychoanalyst functions as a non-person in the therapeutic setting, a dummy "belong[ing] to the realm of 'death' for the subject" (150), thereby allowing them to escape the imaginary relation, and address the Other. In Chapter 4, Jordan Abel's *Injun* employs the digital screen to swivel "the frame to afford a momentary appreciation of the mechanics by which the analysand's reality is virtually constituted" (Price n.p.). Rather than the settler subject looking at images of Indigeneity, *Injun* flips the gaze so that it is the viewing subject who is looked at and who must take stock of what they were looking for. In each of the chapters, the digital screen produces analytic encounters with its analysands.

These moments of analysis are only accomplished through a persistent engagement with the search engine that locates the object of desire (the lack in the Other and in the subject) behind the digital screen. What these moments suggest is not for the subject to go around Google, but to go through Google, to produce "new knowledge [that] can be created only at the place of the lack of the Other" (Verhaeghe and Declercq 19), at the site of the lack of the search result. It is through pushing Google to its limit that true knowledge can be encountered, one that is marked by negativity and inaccessibility rather than positivity and accessibility, prompting change rather than the stasis of consumption. The analysis terminates when the analysand or the internet searcher experiences that they are "an answer of the Real" and not "an answer of the Other" (Lacan qtd. in Verhaeghe and Declercq 13). In other words, the subject gives up the endless interpretation of the Other, and the Other's endless interpretation of them, which comprises the foundation of the user's intimate connection to Google, and Google's intimate connection to the user. Rather than attempting to fill the hole in the Other or in themselves with search results, the subject is freed to search without the restriction of finding. We can begin to enjoy what we cannot find.

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