

**THE STATE OF THE ART:  
CAPITALIZING THE DIGITAL**

by

**Yunn Gwang (Stephen) Tan**

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**APPROVAL**

**NAME:** Yunn Gwang (Stephen) Tan

**DEGREE:** MA

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** The State of the Art: Capitalizing the Digital

**EXAMINING COMMITTEE:**

---

Prof. Roman Onufrijchuk  
Senior Supervisor,  
Adjunct Professor, School of Communication, SFU

---

Prof. Martin Laba  
Supervisor  
Associate Professor, School of Communication

**Date:**

*August 6th, 2004*

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## Abstract

The dual meanings in the work's title are the key to interpreting its content and form. *The State of the Art* explores the tensions between Art and Technology exemplified by the discourses and practices surrounding digital photography. It critiques how academics and artists have privileged and figured the "digital" which elides and hides the ground of corrupting Capital relations it exists in. These accounts constitute an allegorical text that shows the increasing articulation of the elevated spheres of art and academia into relations of production; and demonstrate how historical consciousness is constructed and reproduced by the form of thought. *The State of the Art* forms a chapter in a proposed book project on dialectics and photography, *Negating Negatives*.

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# Glossary of Methodological Terms and Notations

## Terms

### **auratic gesture \***

Discursive device in which the subject/object hides behind the 'authority' of history and failing to call upon how that history it selects to validate itself is partial and ideological. The auratic gesture is a thought structure employed whereby the gesture itself becomes its own epistemic basis (i.e. 'truth' resides in form and process) thereby eliding any considerations if the tradition is corrupt.

### **blindsight \***

Metaphor for historical consciousness; a perceptual phenomena whereby the subject has no awareness of the visual perception. This contrasts with the unconscious conception of ideology (and its associations with blindspot or blindness) by positing a conscious subject that perceives but fails to register or remember. The mode of the archive in the text becomes an allegory for this form of consciousness

### **bourgeois/bourgeoisie**

The use of bourgeois in the text does not refer to a historical or socio-economic category (which is rendered instead as bourgeoisie in the text). Rather, it refers to the hegemonic ethos and ideals of the general middle class in developed Western societies. Although its manifest content may have changed (or at least appeared to), its form and aspirations (and contradictions) remain the same – succinctly summed up by David Brooks' reference to the new bourgeoisie class or BoBos (or Bourgeois Bohemians).<sup>1</sup>

### **,daI«'lEktIk (dialectic) / toU'tQlIti (totality)<sup>2</sup>**

Not dialogue, or Hegel's dialectic; the closest Western equivalent being Adorno's negative dialectic. This conception of the dialectic comes from the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes) as exemplified by the yin-yang symbol. Although the yin-yang symbol today is commonly taken to represent dualism, harmony or balance, female/male energies etc.; these are actually impositions by the Confucian appropriation of the symbol which transformed movement into stasis. In its original conception in the *I Ching*, the symbol represented the movement of totality – how its parts not only constantly negate each other, but also that the seeds of negation lie within itself.<sup>3</sup> Hence the dialectical critique employed in the text uses immanent critique to reveal arrested totalities.

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<sup>1</sup> While I find Brooks' scholarship somewhat suspect, some of his observations are both hilarious and accurate diagnoses of the present situation, particularly the chapter on "spiritualized" consumption. Even the intellectual is implicated in the corrupting form of Capital, which Brooks sums up as thus: "*Her first rigorous book will be with the University of Chicago Press or some such. Her next serious book should go to W.W. Norton. Her big-think book should go to Simon & Schuster or Knopf, and at the end of her career, her blockbuster memoir ... will go to Random House.*" (BoBos in Paradise, p.164)

<sup>2</sup> The use of IPA (International Phonetic Association) notation is an attempt to liberate the concepts from their hegemonic Western/Greek interpretations.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno's negative dialectic still retains the vestiges of humanism by making human history the final measure; a good brief exposition of how the yin-yang symbol was originally conceived as (and derived from) cosmology can be found at <http://www.chineseastrologyonline.com/clc/YinYang.htm>.

### **historical consciousness**

Not ideology per se, but the Marxist/Nietzschean problematic of how one comes to comprehend one's own historical nature; and how conventional discourses construct social memory and forgetting.<sup>4</sup> Since history is more than the mere sum of individual histories, historical consciousness is inextricably linked to conceptions of totality and the dialectic.<sup>5</sup>

### **palindigm \***

From Greek *palin* for back and *deiknynai* to show. An utterance that negates itself (that is related to Brecht's *gest*). In Brecht's theatre, *gestus* refers to a sentence or phrase whose very form and expression reveals its content, thus heightening it. In contrast, a palindigm is an utterance that reveals its own contradictions, which in turn provides the seeds of its own negation i.e. the line of argument is turned into a mobius to reflect upon itself. The palindigm is the means employed by the dialectical method in this text to immanently expose reified boundaries.

### ***partial* \***

When used in italics in the text, becomes a wordplay that simultaneously means incomplete and biased.

*\* These concepts have been formulated to more effectively critique and analyze the phenomena and issue at hand.*

## **Notations**

\* \* \*

Precedes and indicates a thematic change brought about by interpolation, modulation, or restatement.

'xxxx'

Single quotes are used as a bracketing device when used outside of a formal quotation in double-quotes to signal a problematic concept that is generally taken for granted.

(xxxx)yyyy

XxxXX/XyyXX

Round braces and slashes are used to signal the chiasmic intersection of the two conjoined terms. For example, (re)production refers to the production of reproduction

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<sup>4</sup> For example Marx's "The German Ideology" and Nietzsche's "The Use and Abuse of History"

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay's "Marxism and Totality" is a good explication of how different Marxist writers have understood and conceptualized this relationship.



## **Prelude: Notes on Form**

### **Perambulating Problematic**

*The State of the Art* defies conventional categorizations: it appears to be about photography, or music, or perhaps a rendering of Marxist thought; but also within it are critiques of empiricism and “identity thinking”. It is neither, yet it is all of them and more. *The State of the Art* is first and foremost a philosophical meditation, or to be more precise, a philosophical meditation not expressed in hermeneutic but in allegory.

What *The State of the Art* is not, is a thesis in the conventional (contemporary academic) sense whereby chapters are regular and ‘flow’ ‘logically’ towards a grand conclusion.<sup>1</sup> To better comprehend why the thesis form is problematic in this work, one needs to realize that one of the central underlying themes of the text is the primacy of Experience (and how it is not identical to empirical knowledge).<sup>2</sup> The desire and need to

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<sup>1</sup> To consider *The State of the Art* a thesis because it is has the same length is to commit the syllogistic fallacy of identity thinking – which is precisely the point of this project. In employing allegorical forms, *The State of the Art* reinstates the primacy of form which had either been ignored or rendered invisible under thesis conventions. It does not have one thesis but three theses that operate in conjunction on different levels (which allegorical forms are able to express but the conventional thesis cannot). In doing so, it strives towards a form that is even more rigorous than the thesis, as it does not hide behind its form, or process, or canon (and its illusions of objectivity) but rather exposes not only content but also its form and thought for evaluation. This exposition hopefully provides an insight into how the seemingly disparate text is rigorously unified, as well as introducing the philosophical and pedagogical impulses that shaped its form.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps growing up in a proletarian household and struggling to eventually become bourgeois made me sensitive to how ‘peripheral’ forms of knowing are inevitably suppressed or corrupted by dominant hegemonic forms. While not articulated in the text, I conceive of those denigrated knowledges as the UnExpressed – things that are either inexpressible in dominant forms, or deemed unworthy of expression. To paraphrase Benjamin, every monument of Civilization is also

negate conventional academic forms stems from an epiphanic realization that Gramsci's organic intellectual is, unfortunately, a pipe dream. Intellectual discourse operates in a centering hermeneutic; to become an intellectual is to ineluctably become part of the center no matter how periphery one's origins. Rather than wallow in the neoliberal strains of postcolonial and postmodern (and post-whatevers) that purport to celebrate difference, I have become aware that no matter how socially conscious and emancipatory the discourse appears to be, its essence is mired in hegemonic forms of which "identity thinking" is the dominant expression.<sup>3</sup> *The State of the Art*, then, is my attempt to give voice to the UnExpressed; to expose how conventional wisdom and 'cutting-edge' theories are all mired in the same identity form of thought. To do so requires a form that renders Form itself visible, and calls forms into question.

This notion of form as pedagogy and praxis is nothing new. Adorno, one of its more vocal champions, argued in "The Essay as Form" for the immanent expression of the concept whereby the presentation must correspond with what is presented (i.e. consciousness does not merely reside in content but also in form). He saw the potential of this new approach in an essay form (vs. an 'Essay') that is not pre-structured a priori but whose very form is organic to its content, thus embodying an intellectual freedom guided by dictates of its subject matter (which is excluded by conventional presentations).<sup>4</sup> By developing differently than discursive logic, this essay form had the potential for revolt by breaking and critiquing conventional expression.<sup>5</sup> For Adorno, the purpose of this form is to reveal false totalities by "transgressing the orthodoxy of thought" such that "something becomes visible in the object which is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible."<sup>6</sup> Hence the aim of the Adornian essay form is not only to

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a monument of Repression. For instance, Joseph Campbell's studies of myths (which are an instance of the UnExpressed) transformed and expressed them into terms that of 'modern' rationality. He may know all the myths of any given society, but he will never understand the resonance and significance of those myths in the society. Knowledge is imposed and learnt, Understanding is immanent and lived.

<sup>3</sup> This callow celebration of difference is a regression from the thrust towards genuine social equality whereby inequalities become reduced to mere (in)difference. For example, discourse on the Third World is peppered with "postcolonial" labels and blithe references to Said without knowing the actual conditions of the peoples it espouses to represent. The end result is a hermeneutic where (abstract) solutions are debated which substitutes for praxis.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, "The Essay As Form" *New German Critique* 32 (Spring-Summer 1984)

<sup>5</sup> Not all essays correspond to this ideal, the academic thesis form being one that falls far short in its alliance with positivist practices in its "rigid separation of form and content" that is "indifferent to its presentation" instead of being "demanded by the matter itself"; all the while presuming itself "to be responsibly objective and adequate to the mater at hand." (*Essay as Form*, 153)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 171

reflect a historical consciousness, but also to negate 'empirical proof' and reintegrate experience and the writer into the text.<sup>7</sup>

The recent writings of theorists such as Hayden White, Foucault, and Derrida have expressed the same problematic on how writing should also simultaneously critique the institutional bases that makes it possible. Derrida has mandated that a rigorous deconstruction "should at once develop the (practical) critique of the philosophical institution as it stands *and* undertake ... (an) audacious, extensive and intensive transformation of a 'philosophical teaching'."<sup>8</sup> However, other writers such as Sam Weber have observed a critical blindspot in such writings which address "the connection between discursive and disciplinary or institutional practice at the level of *theme* or *content* but not through what might be called a *reflective-performative problematization* of its own discourse"; whereby we are given "path-breaking analyses of the relations of power and discourse but in a style of writing that does not ... put its own relation *qua writing* to that power sufficiently into question."<sup>9</sup>

The unusual form and structure of *The State of the Art* lies in this very performative aspect (that was absent in those writings) combined with the pedagogical intention of Brechtian alienation to contravene the dominant forms of thought that are epitomized and materialized in the academic thesis.<sup>10</sup> The latter form celebrates a linear progression, a telos that begins with (and is encapsulated by) a literature review which

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<sup>7</sup> The bad essay not only fails to criticize but "implicitly and thereby with the greater complicity" presupposes "basic abstract concepts, mindless dates, worn-out clichés" of bad totalities. (Ibid., 154) In contrast, the (Adornian) essay "thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over" to expose the deceptive "unanimity of the logical order" where conflict is brought to a standstill. (Ibid., 164) The purpose of this innovation in form is not to create a new ideal form or language that will merely mirror the structures of domination, but to employ the form of expression as a means of bracketing prejudices. Its purpose is to recapture the totality fragmented by the separation of subject and object, expression and form; to be grounded in experience rather than the pretense of empiricism. Hence the "measure of such objectivity, is not the verification of asserted theses through repeated testing, but individual experience, unified in hope and disillusion. Experience, reminiscing, gives depth to its observations by confirming or refuting them." (Ibid., 156)

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 74

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: form, technics, media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 174

<sup>10</sup> Brechtian alienation is closely allied to Marxist consciousness raising whereby conventions are exposed and bracketed such that the audience arrives at an immanent understanding of their historical nature; and of their own historical nature as Brecht frames the theatre as an allegory of society. Immanence is epiphanic instead of evolutionary, which is why sages across cultures have employed allegorical forms such as the parable to generate that immanent understanding.

constructs a historical sense of evolution (and reproduction) whereby discrete detachable sections are made to appear seamless.<sup>11</sup> To the dominant mode of thinking, the ability to frame phenomena into the form becomes a marker of value and truth; whereby proof resides in process, and epistemology becomes reduced (and made identical) to methodology. To use this corrupt and hegemonic form to express cyclical forms, epiphanic thought, rupture, revolution, and Experience would not only be ironic but utterly ingenuous.<sup>12</sup> What is needed is a form that exposes how the dominant form has been rendered invisible by reification.<sup>13</sup> Such naturalization neutralizes by concealing “the active intervention of a force and a machinery.”<sup>14</sup>

Hence *The State of the Art* is not about photography per se although it appears to be so. What it does is to work through the discourses and practices surrounding digital photography to create a parable that demonstrates how form constructs its own epistemology and historical consciousness by showing how the contradictions and thought structures of Capital are embedded in those discourses and practices. As such it is allied with allegorical forms rather than the conventional academic thesis; the former shows and demonstrates while the latter merely tells. Its seemingly unorthodox form and

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin has linked such practices of progression to the bourgeois ethic of idealization “As a symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole ... In classicism the tendency to the apotheosis of existence in the individual who is perfect, in more than an ethical sense, is clear enough. What is typically romantic is the placing of this perfect individual within a progression of events which is, it is true, infinite but is nevertheless redemptive, even sacred.” *The Origin of German tragic drama* (London: Newloft Books, 1977), 160

<sup>12</sup> To this end I have avoided any rigid literature review in the text, and tried to steer clear from citing canonical texts on photography. Such practices are auratic gestures utilized to hide behind form and history (thereby suspending engagement); an attempt to prove one has undergone the necessary process (as if that was identical to truth). It is an irony that the same discourse that valorizes an active reader also promotes a form that lulls them into complacency. I have employed allegorical exemplars in the text instead to demonstrate the thought process and force the reader to critically evaluate the form as well as the content of expression. Nor is every minor point explicated for the sake of an illusion of completeness; like the musical structure it adopts, the minor points function as passing notes that contextualize the theme towards a larger totality.

<sup>13</sup> The transmutation of the social/historical into the natural can be traced to the central problematic of historical consciousness shared by Marx and Nietzsche. *The State of the Art* is an exploration of what I call the Aesth(ethics) of Be-ing, an understanding of the centrality of the aesthetic (of which not even ontology is free of) in all thought and practices. The essence of any aesthetic is not beauty but ideal form which carries within it both utopia and its ethical ramifications. This aesthetic dimension has always been denigrated or ignored in thought or practice (for exposing it renders one’s ego vulnerable; makes one less of a hero-genius). Yet it is critical because whenever something is not only aestheticized but also naturalized, whenever something becomes an internalized ideal, exclusion and oppression invariably results.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Who’s afraid of Philosophy*, 69

presentation is not just due to subject matter at hand (which conventional methods and forms cannot sufficiently address), but also to bracket the limits of form on content.<sup>15</sup>

## Alternative Allegories

Barbara Savedoff reflecting on the shift from Medieval representations to Renaissance perspective unwittingly exposed realism as a historical aesthetic code that creates the illusion of non-mediated representation. She notes that this valorized 'triumph' in representation actually constitutes a loss whereby a dove in "realist" iconography became not the embodiment of the Holy Spirit but just a dove.<sup>16</sup> This is in line with Pierre Francastel's observation that the Renaissance overturning of both the geometric and figurative system of art by replacing the system of signs "based on abstract values with a representation that turned the image into a microcosm of human experience intended to provide a selective inventory of the world" only resulted in the replacement of Christian legend with "another cycle of mythological legends as the basis of values".<sup>17</sup> The loss of allegory into identity is also the loss of meaning and experience; just as Baroque anamorphosis is no longer experienced as a poignant force of fallibility.

In the opening chapter of *Capital*, Marx undertakes an extended analysis of exchange-value to try and discover the hidden logic that magically equates linen with coats. In doing so, he uncovers "identity thinking" whereby incommensurate levels are homologized (in which appearance becomes essence, quality becomes quantity, history becomes nature) that enables the transmutation of goods into commodities, and men into labor. In doing so, identity thinking elides real differences and presumes the concept to match the subject/object.<sup>18</sup> Allegory exposes the fetish of realism and the literal that dominates modern rationality by demonstrating the fundamental difference between

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida laments the state of contemporary academia and thought as comprising mainly of teachers who merely repeat and reproduce hegemonic structures; "the agrégé-répétiteur should produce nothing, at least if to produce means to innovate, to transform, to bring about the new. He is destined to repeat and make others repeat, to reproduce and make others reproduce: forms, norms, and a content" (Ibid., 75) They become a representation of a system of reproduction which is "the situation of every discourse offered in the university, from the most conformist to the most contestatory ones, at the Ecole Normale or Elsewhere." (Ibid., 76)

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Savedoff, *Transforming images: how photography complicates the picture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000)

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Francastel, *Art & Technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 161

<sup>18</sup> For a more comprehensive rendering, see Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973)

showing and telling.<sup>19</sup> One can liken the relationship between showing and telling to the levels of the metaphysical and physical; the former attempts an overarching understanding, while the latter only knows (*partial*) specifics. While the conventional thesis has no depth of meaning because it believes in unequivocal meaning and thus can only refer to what it tells and nothing more, the allegory operates on the slippage between the boundaries of meaning – between signifier and signified, manifest and latent.<sup>20</sup> Therefore the allegory shatters the epistemic illusions of the thesis form by demonstrating the structural incommensurability of levels that is the latter's (and empiricism's) fallacy and its constructed unity.<sup>21</sup> While the thesis form corresponds to the mode of ideology by telling and constructing a bad totality in which contradictions and its own will to power are concealed, the allegory corresponds to the mode of immanent consciousness by refusing to harmonize ruptures and demonstrating a larger truth beyond what is said by showing instead of telling.<sup>22</sup> A thesis (and identity) can only refer

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin saw the classical symbol as a profane counterpart to Baroque allegory. Like the tussle between myth and science, the sophists and Aristotelean logic that preceded it; "Allegory, like many other old forms of expression, has not simply lost its meaning by 'becoming antiquated'. What takes place here, as so often, is a conflict between the earlier and the later form ... The symbolizing mode of thought around 1800 was so foreign to allegorical expression in its original form that the extremely isolated attempts at a theoretical discussion are of no value as far as the investigation of allegory is concerned." (*Origins of German tragic drama*, 161)

<sup>20</sup> Hence all titles in this work employ double meanings. Thomas Maresca makes a crucial distinction between symbol/personification and allegory. "Allegory, at a very minimal definition, involves saying one thing and meaning another. It is a device of indirection ... personification, which works the opposite way, to define, to make precise, to make explicit. In so far as personification concretizes the abstract and the general, it is the device par excellence of explicitness, which is why it is the darling tool of didacticism and propaganda of every school" ["Personification Vs. Allegory" in *Enlightening Allegory* ed. Kevin Cope (New York: AMS Press, 1993), 25]. In addition, personification (like metaphor and other symbolic figures) is based on "an underlying likeness, of an attribute of some part to the whole or whole to part or the gifting of one thing with some attribute or attributes of another" while allegory works the "exploitation of difference rather than likeness" (*Ibid.*, 27)

<sup>21</sup> This perspective is shared by Christine Buci-Gluckman who in *Baroque Reason* describes allegory as being both rhetorical figure and interpretation that "both destroys and demystifies reality in its finely ordered totality." [(London: Sage Publications, 1994), 102]. Like Benjamin, she connects allegory to Baroque melancholy to allegory because the latter, in laying bare reality, exposes the metaphysical principle of temporality.

<sup>22</sup> Is it any wonder that the teachings of virtually all great prophets and sages throughout history have been in allegorical forms such as parables and fables? Allegory is neither mere fiction nor play, but a rigorous pedagogy. Bourgeois education and pedagogy operate on notions of 'nurture' that implicitly assume people are idiots who need to be manipulated under guidance. In doing so, it substitutes true self-determination for its illusion. Education precludes enlightenment as telling arrest immanence and thought. The nurturing form of bourgeois thought functions to shelter, to interiorize, to keep childlike; it is this same mode of 'nurture' under Communist regimes that transforms dialectics to didactics. John Shawcross has argued that allegory "has as a main thrust a learning process particularly in moral or ethical realms", whether it is a "surface" allegory or constantly developing lesson; "Allegory presents a world that is, but it looks toward a world that

to what is present, while an allegory refers to what is absent (and the UnExpressed); which is why the allegory has historically been an immanent critique of domination and a device of subversion by offering a means to say what is taboo or inexpressible in conventional forms.<sup>23</sup> To this end, Jameson has recently argued (against conventional art criticism) that political content does not reside in either (art) object or form – all political meaning is perceived not from any intrinsic properties but by connecting meanings and contexts onto them such that they become allegorical.<sup>24</sup>

In concealing and conflating immutable levels, forms of identity thinking magically enable appearance to explain essence, the simple to explain the complex, the physical to explain the metaphysical. The valorization of Giddens's structuration and Bourdieu's homology in contemporary sociology, or the "best fit" statistical models employed in empirical studies, reveal how entrenched this logic is in understanding society whereby the model itself becomes reality.<sup>25</sup> The copy itself becomes the mirror held up to judge reality, and to confine it within its frame.<sup>26</sup> Its corollary in contemporary cultural writings is the denigration of 'idealism' and 'elitism' to celebrate the 'grounded' and the 'masses' (which are facilely equated to praxis); as if by sheer force of will and expression, the

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should be (through the didactic) ... making allegory the vehicle for a moral or ethical lesson. The didactic raises both the lesson to be learned and those aspects of the context to be rejected ... even when the didactic stresses the negative, it implies the constructive." ["Allegory, Typology and Didacticism" in *Enlightening allegory* ed. Kevin Cope, New York: AMS Press, 1993), 49]

<sup>23</sup> Central to this is the understanding that the classical age has transformed notions of unity to equate sameness or homogeneity. Prior to the advent of modern rationality, unity was conceived as interplay of relationships between differences. The relationship between the UnExpressed and allegorical structure is described by Thomas Vogler as; "The etymology of "allegory" calls attention to its other key structural features – the existence of duplicate realms and a mode of relationship between them which is simultaneously discontinuous (allegory requires a 'meaning' that cannot be inside it, but must be elsewhere, detachable) and connected by a perfect congruence and closeness. We have an allegorical structure when a text signals that it exists in corresponding relation to some other structure(s) of experience. Allegory is thus in its simplest form a structural relationship of otherness." ["The Allegory of allegory" in *Enlightening Allegory* ed. Kevin Cope (New York: AMS Press, 1993), 98]

<sup>24</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Is space political?" in *Anyplace* ed. Cynthia Davidson (London: MIT Press, 1995). To assert the presence of an intrinsically political form or content (divorced from context) is to project false identities between author-work, between concept-object, and between projection-intention.

<sup>25</sup> This is really what Baudrillard was getting at in *Simulacra & Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994)

<sup>26</sup> This idealization of model and process is revealed by how the deviant or unexplainable in empirical studies is usually rationalized as various forms of human error and imperfection (with its implicit suggestion that the instrument and method is perfect and beyond reproach). The conflation/identity between concept-subject and word-action is exemplified by Political Correctness which substitutes the appearance of equality for real justice.

bourgeois intellectual elite sublates to a purer primordial proletarian state.<sup>27</sup> Under this mode of thinking, notions of literal and realism are mistaken for depth; they are valorized precisely because they construct an identity between the representation and the real. Just as superstition is denigrated by religion because the latter ethic of faith fears the former ethic of self-determination, allegory is rendered problematic by identity thinking because its ethic of subversion exposes the latter's ideological conflation of incommensurate levels. The latter (as the mode of modern rationality) engages in simple complexity, whereby elements are stacked together to form the complex (as if the whole was just the sum of its parts); while the former (as the mode of epiphanic thought) takes the form of complex simplicity that always means more than what it says.<sup>28</sup>

Thus *The State of the Art* undertakes a double transgression in adopting the allegorical form. By undertaking this subversive form, it simultaneously brackets the constructed identities which relegates allegory to fiction, and praxis to populist expression.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, it attempts to expose how allegorical forms are conventionally

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<sup>27</sup> While the charge against 'elitist' theories conceals the elite status of the intellectual, the charge against 'idealism' conceals the fact that there is no 'grounded' or material or realist philosophy that is not profoundly idealistic. The final conflation occurs when thought is mistaken for praxis. The antimony between idealism and its others constructs an exclusive difference that hides their common *partial* form. But nothing is ever reducible to a banal cause-effect. For instance the designs of cameras exemplify the corruption of idealism with its others (and vice versa); ideas of the camera's use contexts are expressed in the shape of the material object, whose form in turn shapes ideas of material forms.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin and Brecht's simultaneous attempts to recover allegory is no coincidence. They both saw how bourgeois modes of realism (as the mode of ideology) culminates in fascism (particularly in its aesthetic of 'progressive' social realism). Allegory thus becomes the genuine dialectical alternative that ruptures and exposes the conventional nature of realism. It contravenes the dictums of conventional exposition because the power of allegory lies in the potency of its allusory nature which paradoxically achieves clarity in concealment (which is extirpated upon exposition).

<sup>29</sup> Kevin Cope in the introduction to *Enlightening Allegory* argues that the peripheralization of allegory was because its multidisciplinary requires a holistic understanding that is inimical to conventional specialization or reduction to simple formulae. According to Thomas Vogler, the denigration of allegory can be traced to the Romantic valorization of the symbol whereby "neoclassical writers sought to establish their literary-historical identity in epistemological terms" for their very 'modernity' depended on this deviant reading of allegory (*The Allegory of allegory*). Similarly, Edwin Honig points out the prejudice against allegory as literature, and as philosophical/rhetorical weapon stem from a "mixture of distaste and half truths" – not just in the Romantic attempt to distance themselves from "predeterminations" (after Romantic notions of the unique-individual-author-hero), but also from the primacy of Plato's Republic (which both conceived of thinking about reality as is i.e. identity, as well as positing eternal ideal forms). Arguing that "no one has yet shown that allegory is inherently of the crude type or why symbolism, for which critics always claim large potencies denied to allegory, is a superior literary practice", Edwin points out that allegory may be symbolic in method but realistic in aim by giving proof to the physical and ethical realities of life [*Dark Conceit* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1959), 14]. Symbolism as the fetish of the individual/artist (i.e. artist as symbol)



treated as fictive and thereby denigrated as truth, and how even the most traditional thesis is itself a work of fiction and performance. The theatre of Bertolt Brecht achieves a similar ends in its use of alienation and gestic effects to unsettle the audience; to expose the very form and conventions of theatre itself thereby showing that they are historical rather than timeless (as espoused by bourgeois aesthetics).<sup>30</sup> Hence *The State of the Art* eschews conventional modes of understanding art (usually via art criticism and/or surveys) because those forms are mired in identity thinking whereby a facile identity is either constructed between author and work (which is particularly obvious in its fetishization of the author's biography and psychology), or between work and society (whereby banal and heavy-handed techniques are celebrated as the zeitgeist of a post-modern/feminist/whatever age). The discussion of photography in the text performs a dual function; it is not only a means to show how discourses and practices are embedded in identity thinking, it is also a parable for historical representation and consciousness for the photograph has long been internalized as a reflection of reality and history.<sup>31</sup> The increasing automation of vision (of which photography is a part of) is

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results in "the art-for-art's saker, the esthetic extremist, is that he is content to take the impassés for granted, and to proceed as if no other way existed or might possibly be found." (Ibid., 51) In contrast, an allegory's formal existence is part of "a larger existence it shares, generically and typically, with other allegories. The allegorical genre refers to the many different works that engage an ideal encompassing the problematic nature of human existence... (and) has offered the rational consciousness a way of regulating imaginative materials that otherwise appear confounded by contradictions and bristling with destructive implications." (Ibid., 14, 53)

<sup>30</sup> The assimilation of the diametrically opposed Stanilavsky's Method acting into mainstream consciousness reveals the hegemonic power of identity thinking. Under Stanilavsky, the actor creates an illusion of heroic craft by reproducing emotions through the Method whereby it is assumed that the convincing portrayal (appearance) of the character is identical to the character's psyche (essence) which has to be rendered identical to the actor's self. These false identities conceal the true relationship of portrayals whereby the audience is convinced not by essential nature of the character or actor, but by how well the actor embodies the projections of the audience onto the character.

<sup>31</sup> Let me elucidate the significance of identity thinking through example. One of the discursive identities photography is embedded in is the correspondence between technology and social models. Just as Cyberpunk theorists of the early 90s mistook the fragmentary appearance of 'netspeak' as evidence of identities fractured by the digital medium, the celebration of digital photography and technology as necessarily 'democratic' by providing choice and access is equally suspect. Not only is access rendered identical to (predominantly white) bourgeois accessibility, but those choices are predetermined. "Democratic" technology has always been a paradox – whereby the more 'democratic' it appears, the more homogenizing in form it becomes. Just as the advent of recording technology did not enable the proliferation of different and/or new music as envisioned (and in fact created an inertia of the same), advances in photographic technology have had similar normalizing effects on image production that even the amateur is not free of. Consider the fashionable double-exposure and/or hand-tinted photographs of the 70s; the celebration of "stop" time or Kodak moments in 80s; the lurid, 'techno' look of enhanced color in the 90s (some call it "false" color, as if color or black & white photography was always an

linked to Western attempts to achieve omnivoyance through the "formation of a whole image by repressing the invisible".<sup>32</sup> With the articulation and proliferation of photography and commercial interests, the image becomes the locus of desires and deception – a veritable "dream factory".<sup>33</sup> The photograph thus becomes a monad of Capital and its reifying tendencies.<sup>34</sup>

## Be-ing Baroque

Inspired by Surrealist montage, Adorno and Benjamin saw the essay written in constellation as corresponding to this ideal of immanent consciousness. However such montage writing is problematic today for it has been extirpated of its political intent by its cooptation in poststructuralist writings and popular culture to become mere style. A piece built entirely on fragments and breaks is as ideological as a seamless one. While I am in general agreement with Adorno (and Deleuze) on the importance of immanence in raising consciousness over imposition, I find their somewhat transcendental conceptions of immanence problematic and contrary to the spirit of the dialectic.<sup>35</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying, one can summarize both projects as positing forms "organic" to the text as ideal expressions. However, not only do notions of "organic" posit these forms as natural instead of historical, but to posit this abstraction as ideal fails to recognize the historicity of the aesth(etic) whereby different forms were considered such ideal "organic" forms at different historical junctures. Furthermore, the experiments in "constellation" and "rhizome" writing still construct a certain telos and progression (albeit a diffuse one) that they purportedly reject; just as constellations are aligned to the North

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unbiased rendition); and the fetish of montage and digital correction/perfection of our current decade.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 33

<sup>33</sup> Peter Dormer, *Design since 1945* (New York, Thames and Hudson, 1993), 92

<sup>34</sup> Like Benjamin, Julian Stallabrass sees allegory as an antidote to (Adornian and Lukacsian critiques of) the lack of mediation, the wide-eyed presentation of facts that lends empiricism (e.g. the photo) its deceptive character. Inimical to "surface" reality exemplified by the photo, "by separating image and meaning, allegory rejects the false appearance of artistic unity and presents itself as a ruin. In this it has an honesty which utopian symbolism can no longer claim. As a form, allegory contains a critique within itself, since its presentation of itself in ruins and decay it becomes an expression of the experience of the experience of 'the passionate, the oppressed, the unreconciled and the failed' ... (which) reveals the fixed and arbitrary systems which are responsible." *Gargantua* (London: Verso, 1996), 179

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze's notions of Becoming are problematic (not just in the implied state of Become), especially in the related concept of the Plane of Immanence - as if the mere transposition onto a plane was the solution. Problems lie in the paradoxical equivalence of everything on a plane (i.e. no difference), and of conceiving the plane as immanent reality instead of projective fantasy (as all planes are).

Star, and roots only grow outward.<sup>36</sup> All forms are impositions, and true immanence is historical – my decision to employ (seemingly arbitrary and incommensurate) musical form has the unintended bonus of bracketing this problematic.<sup>37</sup> No form is unbound and unbinding.<sup>38</sup>

Why did I choose to employ a musical form and logic? I am attempting to write a layered allegorical text that rewards re-reading; to recreate the far-reaching intellectual breadth and depth of past philosophers. I wanted to create a text that can only be understood in totality (just as a detached section of a symphony will make little sense). To achieve this, ideas must be able to move forward, yet simultaneously refer back and reverse to what had preceded it.<sup>39</sup> Music has always employed a rich combination of continuous and discontinuous devices in creating meaning; compositional devices such as passing notes and interpolations fracture the thesis form's illusion of completeness, parallelism is achieved by *cancrizans* and modulations, while retrogrades and inversions offer the dialectic possibility of reversal. Instead of denying history (such as the Adornian constellation and Deleuzian rhizome), musical form moves through time and recognizes that the passage of time does not necessarily mean progress in time.<sup>40</sup> While musical form appears to be an idiosyncratic imposition, its essence is remarkably close to the

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<sup>36</sup> While it has become fashionable in some intellectual circles to celebrate Deleuze's "rhizome" (as opposed to the tree/ book), I would suggest that it is an inadequate (if not inaccurate) metaphor that mistakes growth for flow. Regardless of rhizome or tree, all roots grow outwards to funnel water and nutrients inwards towards the center. Thought should be neither tree nor root but river.

<sup>37</sup> Ian Buchanan in the introduction to *A Deleuzian Century?* has contrasted Derrida's method of breaking down contradictions and reifications to their original antimonies with Deleuze's belief that concepts (if good and rigorous) simply supplant one another when new problems and conditions emerge that can no longer be articulated by the existing apparatus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). I feel neither is a tenable position, Derrida's deconstruction recreates an elevated (Romantic) hermeneutic, while Deleuze seems to justify the creation of hip lexicon and jargon with his implicit (equally Romantic) faith in progress.

<sup>38</sup> In the spirit of immanence that pervades the piece, I leave it to the reader to discover what works for his/her time and place rather than promulgate Positive (alternative) models which will inevitably lapse into a new orthodoxy (like Deleuze's and Adorno's). The conventional charge of providing positive models exposes how that form of thought has mistaken the means (i.e. models) for the ends. Adorno himself has cautioned against such bourgeois identity between means and ends, noting that "those schooled in dialectical theory are reluctant to indulge in positive images of the proper society, of its members, even of those who would accomplish it. Past traces deter them; in retrospect, all social utopias since Plato's merge in a dismal resemblance to what they were devised against. The leap into the future, clean over the conditions of the present, lands in the past." ["Messages in a Bottle" *New Left Review* 200 (Jul/Aug 1993), 12]

<sup>39</sup> The problem with prior written forms is they create antimony between constructed unity and constructed fragments.

<sup>40</sup> We are all doomed to read in one direction in time. Even the most fragmentary montage has to be rendered forward in time to give it meaning.

dialectical and allegorical mode of the work.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the musical form is itself an allegory and redemption of temporality (found in music) against the immortalizing and reifying impulses of Capital (and photography).<sup>42</sup> *The State of the Art* corresponds to the symphonic form inasmuch as it is the unity of disparate parts; but its parts do not correspond to the classic symphonic sonata-rondo developmental form. A thesis is the equivalent of a Hanon study, once the first few bars has been played it builds inexorably to its inevitable conclusion; its logical end being the 'heroic' music employed in fascist spectacles. It operates on linear progressivism and logic, arresting immanent understanding by telling. Yet musical form itself is not entirely free of the principles of linear development, hence *The State of the Art* employs the older Baroque continual variation forms instead of the sequential variation and the sonata-rondo development form (of exposition-development-recapitulation) that were developed according to Enlightenment principles.<sup>43</sup> In the continual variation form, a melodic or harmonic motif is repeated in the bass while other parts vary around it; each repetition presenting the motif in a new context. This corresponds to the mode of allegory for the repeated motif is not explicitly stated, yet has the dual function of grounding and providing the basis for what is heard. It is the Deleuzian repetition that makes the difference rather than mere reproduction for it approaches the Idea-problem in different ways to illuminate it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> In music, the relationship between melody and harmony is akin to that between an allegorical text and its latent meaning; they cannot be divorced as each is dependent on the other. The mode of music also corresponds to my dialectical method of problematizing boundaries (hence the use of allegory) by simultaneously straddling verbal and aural expressions.

<sup>42</sup> Azade Seyhan drawing upon Benjamin's conception of symbol and allegory notes that the latter are essentially representations of time (like music). "Whereas symbol transforms the ruptures of time into a kind of ephemerally transcendent image, allegory crystallizes the imagistic memory of history at the time of this rupture ... a trope of border crossings ... Allegory operates in the critical interstices and contiguities between epochs, paradigms, and forms. It mediates between the secular and the profane, baroque and modernity, history and memory, and image and script." ["Allegory as the trope of memory" in *Interpretation and allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Boston: Brill, 2000), 444-445]

<sup>43</sup> Peter Manuel has surveyed how formal structures in Western music "reflect a general aesthetic conditioned by social economy"; whereby bourgeois aesthetics is linked to closed musical structures (especially the sonata form). Even the "superficially 'abstract' sonata form can in fact encode a tightly structured narrative drama" not unlike the novel ["Modernity and Musical Structure" in *Music and Marx*, ed. Regula Qureshi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 45-46]. One of the most comprehensive works to date is Brian Etter's *From Classicism to Modernism* which is a historiography and analysis of the philosophy and metaphysics of order implicit in differing aesthetic regimes of Western music. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001)

<sup>44</sup> In Deleuze's readings of Nietzsche's eternal return, Deleuze differentiates between the repetition and recycling of tradition, and the repetition that makes a difference. The former can never represent the idea-problem, while the latter is fundamentally transgressive. One can conceive of the former as linear (after the mode of evolution) that privileges notions of influence and inspiration, and the latter as epiphanic (in the mode of revolution) that embraces return and

Benjamin conceives of the Baroque apotheosis as dialectical, being accomplished in the movement between extremes.<sup>45</sup> The extreme and sudden stylistic contrasts of Baroque music (such as terraced dynamics and alternating sections) can be seen as one of its manifestations. In addition, Baroque music (like jazz) offered the most possibilities for self-expression whereby the written music is regarded as interpretative suggestion rather than (reified) absolute truth.<sup>46</sup> It is no coincidence that both the allegorical form of expression and the continual variation form of *The State of the Art* were dominant forms in the Baroque period (commonly defined as the period around the 17<sup>th</sup> to mid 18<sup>th</sup> century). Unlike the doctrines of harmonious progression of the Renaissance period that preceded it and the Classical period that came after, Baroque aesthetics and music were distinguished by the complexity of ornamentation and the juxtaposition of contrasting elements.<sup>47</sup> While the term 'baroque' now has a somewhat negative connotation of flamboyance in contrast to 'classical' rigor, one must remember that aesthetics are mired in the intellectual, political and economic concerns of the period.<sup>48</sup> The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a period of transition just after the violence of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, which now experienced the emergence and ascendance of the Empiricism of Bacon and Hobbes, as well as the Rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza. At around the same time, artistic production was moving from the Church which had dominated in the Renaissance period to aristocratic patrons and eventually to the bourgeoisie in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hence the Baroque period can be considered to be experimentation in expression which had earlier been curtailed by the Church during the Renaissance period, but not yet codified by the Classical period. Being the transition between a religious humanism and a secular rationalism, the

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rediscovery. The denigration of the supernatural in modern rationality is symptomatic of linear thought – for what are ghosts but a manifestation of return (as well as representing a mystic knowledge beyond empiricism). Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* is a brilliant rendering of the trope of return by explicating the haunting of the commodity in Marx's phantasmagoria. (New York: Routledge, 1994)

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Vogler (*The Allegory of Allegory*) views Benjamin's work as a challenge to German Romantic criticism "and in a wider context to the ideological formulation that idealized the symbolic at the expense of allegory", seeing allegory as recording the incompleteness and incompletable in analogical form and hence can go on forever, even when it stops at any point.

<sup>46</sup> The popular fallacy of Baroque music as mathematical stems from presuming an identity between what philosophers wrote and the musicians experienced, as well as mistaking any explicit utilization of mathematics to be literal rather than an allegorical rendition of cosmology.

<sup>47</sup> One can consider these aesthetic elements to be the forerunners of avant-garde aesthetics "shock" effects.

<sup>48</sup> And I would add, overdetermined by technology. For example, Rachmaninoff's popular piano concertos would not have been possible without the emergence of a concert-going public and the development of high tension stringing in piano design to withstand the fortissimos.

tensions between the emerging empirical knowledge and the older mystical knowledge manifested themselves in various allegorical forms whereby tangible phenomena was seen as standing in for larger cosmological truths. Hence vanitas were used to illustrate the temporal nature of earthly life and the folly of materialism and human desires, while anamorphic drawings symbolized the imperfection and unreliability of human senses.<sup>49</sup> Baroque melancholy can be linked to this sense of catastrophe (i.e. the temporal nature of existence and endeavor) that is manifested in the fascination with ruins and decay (vs. the immortalization and reification of classicism/capital).<sup>50</sup> Hence the function of allegory is to “consign reality to a permanent antimony, a game of the illusion of reality as illusion, where the world is at once valued and devalued.”<sup>51</sup>

## Techne Tension

The significance of the Baroque in this discussion of digital media does not just lie in its congruent world views of the totality and experimentations in form; but also our own period is claimed to be undergoing a similar period of transition and experimentation; the development of Galileo’s telescope and Newtonian optics led to debates on vision which the development of digital imaging technology have reinvigorated. What can we redeem from the Baroque that will offer insights into our own period? In saying this, I am not advocating a nostalgic return to the past but to counter the telos of ‘progress’ in contemporary discourses. Hiding behind notions of ‘history’ is as corrupt as promulgating ‘progress’ for both are constructed by dominant powers and only cast their gaze in one direction. To truly move forward one must look both ways by redeeming elements in the trash heap of history which will show us the path forward even though our backs are turned.<sup>52</sup> The passage of time is not identical to progress;

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<sup>49</sup> The doctrine of imperfect sensory knowledge stemming from Aristotle was viewed allegorically in the Baroque period as the fallibility of humanity. This understanding is transformed in the Enlightenment through the substitution of “perfect” senses using ‘objective’ instrumentation and methodology. Photography represents the culmination of this ethos.

<sup>50</sup> Irving Wohlfarth in “On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin” locates the catastrophe view of history in Benjamin as originating from Man’s fall from grace in Genesis i.e. being cast out of Eden condemns Mans into labor and subjectivity [in *The Problems of Modernity* ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1991)]. I find this an intriguing allegorical reading for it suggests rationality’s (and capital’s) drive towards an over-arching objectivity stems from a desire to recreate Eden.

<sup>51</sup> Buci-Gluckman, *Baroque Reason*, 71

<sup>52</sup> Reference to Klee’s *Angelus Novus* painting which Benjamin saw as the Angel of history which moves forward with its back to the future, and only seeing the increasing debris of history piled before it.

instead we are trapped in the eddies of time.<sup>53</sup> Existing debates on digital photography are surprisingly similar to the very same debates that photography and other reproductive technologies went through before being naturalized and legitimized.<sup>54</sup> One of the recurring critiques in *The State of the Art* is how existing discourses on digital media have typically considered a reified conception of it in isolation and have failed to both critically evaluate that understanding or to consider the technology in the field of other debates and technologies. In doing so, the relationship between photography and capital production, as well as the naturalization of the technology have been elided. What is problematic is not what we consider as problems but what we no longer consider as problems for what is naturalized is usually reified. While I consider contemporary discourses flawed in their ahistorical and *partial* understanding of the larger totality, I see them as being invaluable in unwittingly bringing these reifications (via *palindigms*) to the foreground for critical re-evaluation. Like Stanley Aronowitz, I find “apocalyptic ruminations” of technology as problematic as the “strategic amnesia of technophiles” for modern technology has not only “ingressed” into events but become an inextricable event itself in contemporary culture. Hence the key question is “how to free technology from the thrall of the organization of labor, education, and play according to the canons of industrial society.”<sup>55</sup> Jameson points out that the perioditization inherent in such ‘pomo’ discourses is a projective historical tendency that dates as far back as 5<sup>th</sup> century AD when a distinction was first made between the ‘new’ and the ‘modern’; the ‘new’ being an isolated subject while the ‘modern’ is grasped in a narrative or time series (i.e. as telos vs. a cyclical trope). Thus ‘Modernity’ has always been a rhetorical trope (which is itself a sign of modernity in its creation of distinct temporalities) that involves setting a date and positing a beginning (i.e. “the very concept of modernity, then, is itself modern, and dramatizes its own claims”).<sup>56</sup> In Jameson’s words,

The past is created by way of its energetic separation from the present; by way of a powerful act of dissociation whereby the present seals off its past from itself and expels and ejects it; an act without which neither present nor past truly exist, the past not yet fully constituted, the present still a living on within the force field of a past not yet over and done with ...

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<sup>53</sup> After all, what are contemporary debates on reality and simulacra but a Nietzschean return to the Platonic project.

<sup>54</sup> A good exploration of the changing conceptions of humans and technology, from fear to “the machine in the garden” can be found in Julie Wosk’s *Breaking Frame* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992)

<sup>55</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, “Technology and the Future of Work” in *Culture on the Brink* ed.s Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckery (Seattle, Bay Press, 1994), 16, 22

<sup>56</sup> Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 35

The future exists for us not merely as a Utopian space of projection and desire, of anticipation and the project: it must also bring with it that anxiety in the face of an unknown future and its judgments for which the thematics of simple posterity is a truly insipid characterization.<sup>57</sup>

Hence what is problematic is not merely what is 'modern technology', but what is 'modern' and what is 'technology'. Thus when Heidegger located *techne* as the root word of both art and technology, he was exposing how art and technology are historical and social constructions in any society. Francastel in has also noted that technology only emerges fully-fledged in hindsight, rejecting the distinction (and antimony) between art (Kantian functionlessness) and technology (functionalism) as ahistorical.<sup>58</sup> According to Francastel, the "irreducible opposition between industry and art, the belief in the inspired nature of aesthetic contemplation, the conflict between Faustian man and nature" emerged in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century due to social and economic events (particularly the doctrines of functionalism, rationality, and production) that led to the separation of the two spheres.<sup>59</sup> Art, which had been based on reproduction, now sought to define itself in terms of the unique, transcendental object.<sup>60</sup> Against Lewis Mumford's celebration of the machine as revolution, Francastel critiques the idealism and mystique of progress that posits the industrial revolution as a fundamental change in the cultural sphere of the Western world. Pointing to the incorporation of organic forms in wrought iron during the industrial revolution, Francastel argued that "in no field do new structures eliminate old ones; they replace them ... Euclidean geometry continues to hold true, but its underlying assumptions are now incorporated into other, far vaster systems."<sup>61</sup> This observation still holds true in this age of digital technology whose discourses perioditizes it as a historical rupture, all the while borrowing from the past (e.g. manipulation and fragmented representations) but presenting it as new.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 25-26

<sup>58</sup> I have an affinity for crusty coots like Francastel and Adorno (not just because I will probably end up being one myself). Their perspectives (like their crustiness) are a poison pin to puncture the bubble of bourgeois pretensions and pomposity. Abrasiveness as antidote to the concealment of conflict by bourgeois 'pleasant' niceties.

<sup>59</sup> Francastel, *Art & Technology*, 42

<sup>60</sup> In the visual arts, this occurred in tandem with the development of graphics design and the industrial artist [see for example, John Barnicoat, *Posters: A concise history* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988)]. Against conceptions of the eternal art object, Francastel proposes the "plastic object" which has different utilitarian and figurative meanings over time and contexts.

<sup>61</sup> Francastel, *Art & Technology*, 22

<sup>62</sup> As the culmination of past technology and wish images, digital technology has its own will to power. Francastel describes this shift (which predates Baudrillard's orders of simulacra by half a century) as not merely a change in production but of social relations (not unlike Heidegger's



Similarly, Rutsky has argued that even though views of technology have changed in the age of high technology, the definition of technology as remained largely unquestioned – the Heideggerian “question concerning technology” which is “by no means anything technological.”<sup>63</sup> According to Rutsky, the conception of technology in Western culture has been defined by its shifting relationship to art; even when the conception of technology has been explicitly posed in contrast to art (and vice versa). Hence notions of “high tech” are essentially aesthetic, not just in the practice of designing a “high-tech” look or style to objects, but that it is essentially a rhetorical trope – one that imparts an aesthetic of being on the “leading wave” and “avant garde” that one should be critical of.

If the rhetoric of the modernist avant-gardes served to distinguish an artistic vanguard from the rest of the population, the notion of a high-tech avant-garde privileges a “highly technological” vanguard that is also, often, “highly capitalist.”<sup>64</sup>

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The zeitgeist of this work is perhaps best summed up by Hal Foster’s invocation of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Minor as “an intensive ... use of a language or form which disrupts its official or institutional functions.” The Minor has no desire to be the new center or official tongue, yet it also has no “romance of the marginal” and is in fact opposed to the marginal’s “delusory critique positioned as it is in relation to the center”.<sup>65</sup>

Resistant to semiotic appropriations, it is able to expose the very ‘mishmash’ that the code seeks to exorcise. But the minor must do more than ruin or exceed the code as system; it must also disrupt it in time – which is to say it must connect it with minor practices in the past... to become critically effective in the present.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore *The State of the Art* is unremittingly negative about art and academia, and thus constitutes a self-negation since I am associated with both spheres. This has risen from disillusionment and frustration at how these spheres reproduce themselves and

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transformation of man into standing-reserve); “In the first age, then, the machine reproduced human movements. In the second, it produced new objects while guiding its own movements. In the third age, the movements and objects derived from its logic were imposed on man.” (Ibid., 166)

<sup>63</sup> R.L. Rutsky, *High Techne* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 2

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 5

<sup>65</sup> Hal Foster, “Readings in Cultural Resistance” in *Recodings* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 177-178

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

structures of domination.<sup>67</sup> I am not claiming that all their members are necessarily corrupt, but rather in showing how the forms of thought mire them into oppression I am raising the need for negation to fulfill their promise of emancipation and enlightenment. For those not familiar with the Baroque musical forms I employ, I offer the following program notes as a guide to the arc of my arguments so that you can better assess the relationship between form and content. It has its own discursive logic which does not mean it is illogical but that it does not adhere to traditional forms or expectations. Like the early surrealist paintings, it not only advocates but demands a new mode of consciousness for comprehension.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> My overarching attacks on empiricism, technology discourse, artistry, and academic practices etc. stem not from a paucity of experience but an excess; yet it is not so much sour grapes but to seek a rupture in those degraded discourses and practices that will pave a way towards a hopefully more equitable society.

<sup>68</sup> While it will be easy to dismiss this work as sophistry instead of engaging in it, doing so constitutes a palindigm that ironically proves my very point about the inertia and reproductive nature of (reified) ideal forms which creates historical (un)consciousness. The positive connotation of "sophisticated" is itself historical (and constitutes a contradiction) for its etymology derives from the denigrated "sophist". Just as I have tried to redeem the baroque from the trash heap of history, I shall do the same for the sophist. The denigration of the Sophist (which Foucault glosses over in "Discourse on Language") can be traced to Socratic rationalism that privileges reason over experience and Platonic epistemology whereby only the mind (and not the senses) can grasp perfect form. Since Socrates and Plato have been canonized for centuries, it is no surprise that their views on the Sophists have been naturalized as objective critiques instead of being the result of historical circumstances. The Sophists were a threat to the idealized (cerebral) philosophical enterprise of Socrates and Plato by formulating teachings based on experience rather than rational logic (and getting paid for them) in the process. In addition, Sophists rejected transcendental ideal forms for they believed in synthesis, relativity, and the interconnectedness of all things – ideas that were 'discovered' in our 'post-Cartesian' age. Hence the Sophists presented a challenge on both the socio-economic as well as the epistemological level. The present day definition of sophistry as any fallacy designed to deceive by being plausible in form, is a palindigm that reveals how sophistry fractured rational notions of ideal form which was the basis of its epistemology (as well as how modern rationalism continues to hide behind ideal forms). Susan Jarratt in *Rereading the Sophists* (a notable attempt to reinterpret the legacy of the Sophists outside the conventional filters of Aristotle and Plato) has explicated the sophist method as one based on immanence that are not "spurious trick(s) for clouding the minds of listeners but rather works to awaken in them an awareness of the multiplicity of possible truths" which connects them to allegory, Marx, Brecht, et al. As she puts it, "the sophists, fully capable of understanding a logic of non-contradiction, were less concerned with the 'scientific' project of establishing a formal logic than with exploring social consequences of logical moves." (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 22

## Overture: Theses towards an Epistemo-Critico Prologue<sup>69</sup>

To me, the *Theses* are the densest and most exciting piece of writing in the entire work. In the context of *The State of the Art*, the *Theses* pay homage to (and function similarly in) two writings that had provided me with a vocabulary for my own philosophy and politics. The opening chapters of Marx's *Capital* and Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* provide the philosophical and analytical bases from which to understand the rest of the text; the remainder of which is dedicated to showing and demonstrating those ideas and perspectives expounded in the opening chapters.<sup>70</sup> The *Theses* establish a constellation of philosophical perspectives that underlie both the analytical method as well as themes investigated in the other movements.<sup>71</sup>

Myth and Metaphysics: traces the problems in flawed conceptions of democracy, logic, and totality to the denigration of the metaphysical in modern rationality is traced to the latter's origins in the Enlightenment (27.1). The resulting belief in individual power (or self-determination) is criticized for placing Man in the center of its cosmos; whereby the individual occludes larger social or environmental considerations (27.2). Its fatal contradiction lies in rendering Man as an abstraction which contravenes its supposed intent of emancipation (28.2).<sup>72</sup> Even the supposed rupture of Cartesian perspectives by Postmodern theorists are mired in the same degraded form (28.3).

Revolution of the Ruin: introduces the metaphysical categories of totality (which is treated in constellation with dialectic, history and consciousness), using the language of Lukacs as its reference (29.2). It argues the way out of a bad totality is not in a facile head-in-sand rejection of totalities (in 27.1 and 28.2), but in recognizing the nature of totality (i.e. what is excluded, what contradictions are harmonized etc.) (30.1). A quick

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<sup>69</sup> The function of an overture is to precede a larger work and prepare the audience for the work that is to follow. In the classical overture this is achieved in a single movement by quoting fragments and themes from the work; this not only codifies the form of the overture itself but integrates both work and overture into a necessary linear progression. This overture, however, corresponds to the baroque overture which is an independent multi-movement work that introduces the following work. Its relationship to the work is not in a potpourri rehashing of tunes, but in setting the mood, or establishing harmonic and melodic devices that will be further developed in variation.

<sup>70</sup> Whenever decimals are enclosed in brackets e.g. (12.2), it indicates the section occurs on page 12, paragraph 2.

<sup>71</sup> In a way, I am trying to write about ideology and hegemony without naming and reifying them (as they have become such convenient labels and markers), and locating them in the very form of thought itself.

<sup>72</sup> This is the first demonstration of how the form of thought itself is ideological.

exposition of the differences between the Hegelian and the Marxian dialectic (30.2) segues into my conception of the dialectic which connects it to the immanent power of subversion (vs. resistance) whose movement is located in the boundary between negations (30.3).<sup>73</sup> The theatrical devices of Brecht are then elucidated to show the ways the dialectic is employed to subvert and be the site of immanent consciousness (31.2).<sup>74</sup>

The Wish, the Promise, or, the desire for Utopia: The concept of wish image and utopia embedded in Benjamin's "Ruin" is explicated as a desire of what is lacking and its denial; this is connected to Marx's demonstration on how forms of Capital production systematically deny their utopia of emancipation and self-determination (32.2).<sup>75</sup>

Performing Truth: Citing Lukacs and Heidegger, the *partial* thought of modern rationality is critiqued and its hegemonic power located in its form (33.2).<sup>76</sup> The empirical bias of this rationality (and its presumed identity with experience) is examined (34.1) via the concept/method of the *palindigm*.<sup>77</sup> The utopic promise of progress behind empiricism and modern rationality is shown to be corrupt in its consistent denial, and in the substitution of its own myths as truth (34.2).<sup>78</sup> Situating modes of empirical thought in opposition to totality, the inability of empirical thought (with its false identities) to grasp or understand totality (35.2) is demonstrated in a homage to Marx's exposition of the identities behind the theory of value (36.2).<sup>79</sup> The rationale behind the form of the main text is hinted at by connecting the conventional thesis form and its practices to the corrupting mode of empiricism i.e. ideology resides in form (37.2).<sup>80</sup> In addition, it establishes the aim of the main text to call conventional academic discourses and art practices into question (38.1).

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<sup>73</sup> The boundary problematic is the basis for the *palindigm* and related to the allegory.

<sup>74</sup> I also point out how Benjamin's "Ruin" correspond to the dialectical mode. This concept/method will recur throughout the text whenever contradictions or tensions between past and present practices are exposed.

<sup>75</sup> This conception of Utopia will recur throughout the overture and the first movement, until it metamorphosizes into the concept of the *auratic gesture* in the second movement.

<sup>76</sup> *Partial* in both meanings of the word – viewing only in part; and biased. Foucault will later develop this problematic in *Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>77</sup> This shows how modern rationality renders its own mediation invisible – a form/critique that will recur throughout the text. The concept/method of the *palindigm* also recurs throughout the text and is the means through which inconsistencies and contradictions are identified.

<sup>78</sup> i.e. change of content but not of form.

<sup>79</sup> It also shows modern rationality's false identity between negation and nihilism.

<sup>80</sup> In a way, this is my negation of existing critical methodologies which have located ideology almost solely in content.

## I. DOA: Dead On Arrival (or, Digital Ontology Arrested)

The first movement is an allegory of thought (or the aesthetics of technology) which works through the discourses around the digital image and digital technology by writers who have typically defined it in opposition to analog forms. It critiques how these writers, in their attempts to copy Benjamin's *Work of Art* essay, have constructed the digital as revolution by equating appearance with essence. Hence changes in technical form are supposed to precipitate changes in perception and world order. Constructed as a *ruggerio* (whose key feature is the continual variation of the bass line), the movement simultaneously pays homage to Heidegger's ontological investigation of technology ("*The Question Concerning Technology*") with its pattern of statements and reversals.

Cycle 1: William Mitchell's canonical definition of digital media opens the movement; Mitchell not only defines the digital as being discrete/binary, he also argues that the properties of the digital image (e.g. reproduction and manipulation) are the result of this discrete nature (39.1). This position is partially reversed with Kevin Robbin's critique of how such views that purport a corresponding revolution in society are little more than "unthinking progressivism" which obscures nature and significance of real continuities (40.2).<sup>81</sup> Another partial reversal occurs with Lev Manovich showing inconsistencies between Mitchell's arguments and actual practice (40.3).

Cycle 2: However the form of Manovich's arguments share the same progressivistic bias as Mitchell and so do not present a real alternative (41.2). The need for a new ontology is raised by negating existing discourses of digital as binary and revolutionary by citing practices not mentioned in those writings that point to a continuation rather than revolution of existing photographic practice (42.2). The discourse of digital as revolution is further negated by pointing out how ahistorical understandings have transformed analog media into a strawman (43.2)

Reversal of Cycle 1 and 2: Begins by pointing out the contradictions and fallacies inherent in the discourse of revolution, and argues that such facile conclusions are the result of the separation of theory, technique and practice. It first negates the notion of digital as discrete by reference to the use of the grain focuser in the darkroom which

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<sup>81</sup> This notion of revolution in technical form leading to revolution in society is the utopic element of digital discourses epitomized by Mitchell, Manovich, and Binkley.

fractures the “continuous” analog image into discrete silver grains; then it negates the notion of digital as binary by pointing out the conflation of incommensurate levels (44.2).<sup>82</sup>

Cycle 3: Utilizes Timothy Binkley’s work to epitomize discourses that construct the digital as immaterial. Such discourses appear to be more refined than those that construct digital as discrete. However they share the same false identity between technical form and essence (46.2).

Reversal of Cycle 3, (and its Reversal): Laura Mark’s critique of the digital/immaterial discourse is cited. However, her arguments (like Binkley’s) are predicated on the same structural fallacy that automatically associates the digital as unreal. The actual experience of photography is contrasted with theoretical assumptions of the objective image (46.3).<sup>83</sup>

Reversal of all digital discourses: Points out the best understanding of the digital/analog relationship comes from Anthony Wilden (whose writing predated digital media). Wilden understood that analog and digital components co-exist within any system, and the true significance of the digital is its objective mediating relationship that transforms quality into quantity (47.2).<sup>84</sup> The critique began in prior reversals is continued by citing inconsistencies between actual practice and theory (48.2).<sup>85</sup>

After showing through dialectical critique how the forms of thinking about digital media are based on historical blindness (which edits out historical precedents) and are rooted in the empiricist fallacy of structural origin (i.e. part explaining whole), I locate the essence of digital technology in a form of *gestell* that I call the *archivic grid*.<sup>86</sup>

Ontology: Re-connecting with the notion of digital as constituting a power relationship, I point out that definitions of digital/analog constitute an epistemic boundary (49.2). Just as Heidegger locates the essence of technology in a will to power (*gestell*), I argue that

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<sup>82</sup> Both examples show the false identity between appearance and essence.

<sup>83</sup> Also an illustration of the fetish of non-mediation, and the invisibility of form

<sup>84</sup> Not unlike identity thinking and the commodity form.

<sup>85</sup> Showing how existing discourses on digital media are manifestations of a particular historical consciousness that gestures towards transcendence (which is key theme of Overture).

<sup>86</sup> In short, I am trying to show that digital is *immaterial* (pun). That is, by locating the essence of digital media in the *archivic grid*, I show that digital discourses that try to locate the essence of digital as binary/immaterial are themselves immaterial and a smokescreen for material relations of power and production.

this *gestell* takes the form of an *archivic grid* under digital media and examine its homogenizing and exclusionary power (50.2). The wish image of the digital image (hinted at in 44.1) is connected with the historical impulses of archiving behind the invention and consumption of optical devices (52.2). Sekula's meditations on an archive of historical photographs are cited to illustrate the ways archives modify and shape a society's historical consciousness, and how those impulses are rooted in "aggressive empiricism" (53.2). More significantly, Derrida notes that the form of any archive is never objective but determines what can be archived; I connect this illusory neutrality of the archive to the blindness to mediation (see 47.1) in photographic discourse (55.1). In the remaining paragraphs, I explicate the utopic element of the *archivic grid* (how it is the culmination of past wish images), its connections to Capital relations, and its fatal contradiction in its own grid boundary.<sup>87</sup>

## II. The Ideology of Art

The second movement is an allegory of practice (or the technology of aesthetics) which examines how the perception of the practices of art and digital media are ideological in their idealization of art (which conceals its true historical nature).<sup>88</sup> This is the harmonic progression of the *chaconne* from which this movement is based on.<sup>89</sup>

aura to simulacra: Daniel Herwitz in *Making Theory/Constructing Art* has critiqued the facile transpositions of critical theory onto artistic practices, hence the movement begins by burlesquing the hyperbolic claims and jargon of writers who celebrate such practices (57.1).<sup>90</sup> Jeffrey Sconce's polemic is cited to question suggest such academic thought is the result of relations of production (59.1).<sup>91</sup> The jargon employed by such claims is traced to the concept of simulation advanced by Baudrillard (60.2) whose definition is critiqued for having the same ahistorical blindsight as the claims of 'post-photography' by

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<sup>87</sup> This is an illustration of the *palindigm* as method. The contradiction of the boundary in the grid connects with the issue of (epistemic) boundaries explicated at the beginning of the section.

<sup>88</sup> The second movement represents a *modulation* (i.e. to move into a related key) from the first movement. While the first movement had examined the historical sense of discourses of digital photography by academics, the second movement examines the historical sense of practices of digital photography by artists.

<sup>89</sup> *Chaconne* is a form whose central feature is the repetition of an underlying harmonic progression while melodies change above it.

<sup>90</sup> This links the current movement to the earlier movement whereby it is not a discrete cycle, but one that is related to (and emerges from) the earlier cycle.

<sup>91</sup> Shows how academic thought is not entirely motivated by pure 'interest' or 'objectivity', but mired in relations of power that it disavows.

other writers (61.2). A dramatic reversal occurs when Baudrillard is then redeemed by pointing out how those writers have misinterpreted the crux of simulation theory; and how that very crux contravenes the structural fallacies that are the basis of their thought (63.2).<sup>92</sup> However simulation theory's elision of material relations is critiqued by pointing out how those technologies are enmeshed in Capital and its utopic vision of progress (64.2).<sup>93</sup>

the auratic gesture: The section on Benjamin (66.2) and Bloch (70.1) is the transition from the earlier section into the discussion of the *auratic gesture*; it corresponds to the *Invention* form where two seemingly different sections are juxtaposed separately before being played simultaneously to show how they actually fit together.<sup>94</sup> Hence Benjamin's aura and Bloch's utopia ultimately collide in the conception of the auratic gesture. Against popular misinterpretations (showing parallels with misinterpretation of Baudrillard in 63.2), Benjamin's *aura* is redeemed via a non-linear rereading (that is sensitive to the essay's allegorical and constellation form) of the *Work of Art* essay to locate it as the loci of historical consciousness. The collision of this redefinition of *aura* with Bloch's utopian function produces the concept of the *auratic gesture* and its false identities (71.2).

The ideal/idyll of art: The contamination of existing art practices by auratic gestures is shown by an analysis of Tom Kemp's artist statement (which exemplifies the genre) (75.1). The practices of editioning (77.2) and the Romantic narrative of artist-hero (79.1) are analyzed to show how they are forms of auratic gestures. The nature of the artist-hero is then examined to show how it is a cultivated historical form linked to institutional concerns (79.2). The tensions between the emerging digital practices and the older darkroom practices (first expressed in the discussion on editioning 77.2) are further examined and connected to the elevation of art and the bourgeois fetish towards immortalization exemplified by the archive (85.2). The movement concludes by examining art as a system of power which despite being discursively constructed as

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<sup>92</sup> The redemption of Baudrillard serves as a parable to the partial impulses of modern rationality (exemplified by the thesis form) that mistakes the part for whole.

<sup>93</sup> The concluding paragraph cross-references the "aura to simulacra" section to the "myth and metaphysics" section of the Overture by pointing out the contradictions in postmodernism's claims to transcend Cartesian/Enlightenment perspectives.

<sup>94</sup> The other purpose of redeeming Benjamin (which is the second parable) and Baudrillard is to bracket the claims of 'digital' theorists (who frequently invoke them erroneously), and rescue them from being mere aesthetic earmarks by 'digital' artists.



above and beyond the market (not unlike academia), has never been free of relations of production; be they patrons or capital markets (86.1).

### III. Real-ly Real-lie

While the first two movements have shown how academic discourses and artistic practices of digital photography are *partial* thought mired in forms of identity thinking, the final movement attempts to reveal some of the issues and material realities that have been concealed by those discourses and practices. By working through the issues in production, consumption, and ownership, this movement attempts to demonstrate how historical consciousness is not mere abstraction but embedded and manifest in “daily” practices.<sup>95</sup> This is the recurring problematic (expressed as the continual denial of utopia by Capital itself) that parallels the repeating bass line of a *passacaglia*.<sup>96</sup>

digital revolution: argues that the digital is not a revolution from but an evolution of capital relations. It begins by citing some practices ‘digital’ artists employ to show the identity made between technical form and its essential expression (91.1).<sup>97</sup> This position is reversed by pointing out the identity constructed between digital and manipulation in those practices is ahistorical; pointing out that the desire to perfect reality was the historical culmination of the desire to perfect reality (and render mediation invisible) rather than a radical departure (93.2). The camera becomes an allegorical object by first connecting this property of invisibility/non-mediation to the older discourse of photography and its Western biases (94.2); and as a monad of capital development and globalization by explicating the monopolies and peripheries in the production of imaging technologies (95.2). The section ends by showing how such contradictions between discourse (appearance) and the practices (essence/experience) are a result of, and construct, a *partial* historical sense that denies the utopic promise (97.2).

peripheral nature: this next variation begins by picking up (and negating) the notion of digital as “cybernetic capitalism” that concluded the previous section. Employing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “desiring machine”, it explicates how consuming digital technology embeds one deeper into the system of production and how the form of

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<sup>95</sup> It also critiques notions of digital media as democratizing (and the illusion of self-determination) by pointing out the actual complex of relations they are embedded in.

<sup>96</sup> *Passacaglia* is a form whose central feature is the repetition of an underlying bass line.

<sup>97</sup> This short discussion of various ‘revolutionary’ ‘digital’ techniques artists employ which opens the movement relates it to the previous movement by recalling its opening.

the system denies its utopic promise (99.2). The historical articulation of imaging technology into Capital is traced to show how users have increasingly given up control over their development and became constructed by commercial interests (101.2). The conflation of appearance with essence is demonstrated by pointing to how the appearance of convenience and democratization of imaging technology conceals its (fascist) controlling and containing nature (102.2). This increasing alienation ultimately arrests real praxis and alternatives, whereby “presets” are mistaken for real choices (103.2).<sup>98</sup>

real(i)ty: The final variation explodes the contradictions inherent in notions of immaterial digitality and digital property. Drawing upon Bernard Edelman’s historiography of image copyright, it traces the initial resistance to photography as art (because it is “property by appropriation”) to the reformulation of the status of photographers due to commercial pressures (106.3).<sup>99</sup> Using texts on digital property written for the mass market, I dialectically expose the fallacies and contradictions in their assumptions to demonstrate the historical nature of property and how corporate interests become harmonized with personal interests (107.2). The final blow is delivered by locating the utopic Romantic idealizations that are the basis of copyright assumptions and showing how its very thought form denies attainment of the utopic ideal (112.2). By way of conclusion, some thoughts on the significance and historical consciousness behind the intertwining of digital technology and Capital interests are offered (113.2).

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<sup>98</sup> This is similar to Marx’s argument in *Capital* whereby alienation renders labor into the periphery of the production circuit.

<sup>99</sup> This recalls the discussion of the photographer’s craft in the previous movement.

## **Overture: Theses towards an Epistemo-Critico Prologue**

### ***I. Myth and Metaphysics***

The fear of the metaphysical can be traced back to the beginnings of what we call humanism in the Enlightenment; rationality exemplified by the Cartesian cogito "I think therefore I am." This intersection of truth with "man's nature" constructs the world and the social as a conglomerate of self-interests – it is little surprise that bourgeois economics is predicated upon the harmonized contradiction that a greater good emerges from the pursuit of self-interests.

Such facile belief in individual power conceals real dependencies and relationships of power – Marx has noted how political economists are fond of Robinson Crusoe stories because all of Crusoe's products are the result of his individual labor, and seemingly independent from the social.<sup>1</sup> This belief persists today in the form of contemporary self-help notions of an attitudinal change where the poor and the oppressed are seen as deserving of their conditions, their unproductive nature due to inherited imperfections. It not only fails to recognize real social and material constraints but can only be enacted by the bourgeois subject who has not known suffering. Under this rationality, the social becomes defined in relation to the individual man as he becomes the universal measure. The interconnected nature of the social and its interrelation to the non-human, which have been the expressions of the totality of

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977)

existence by ancient religions, become increasingly elided.<sup>2</sup> The standardization of 'objective' measures of time and space by the Gregorian calendar and the meter respectively exemplifies this denigration of experience, displacing previous measures based on mankind's relationship to the environment where once distance was expressed in terms of time marked by the movement of celestial bodies. The relationship has been inverted; the world now revolves around 'Man'.

However, in order for man to become universal measure, man himself has to lose his individuality to become an abstraction - the "categorical imperative" of Man.<sup>3</sup> Such abstraction sans critical reflection leads to reification. Like the categorical imperatives of Economy or Democracy (or even the displaced imperative of God), Man becomes the engine and justification for all sorts of abuses in its name – the root of wars, pillaging and suffering that Man is supposed to end. Against the valorization of such uncritical humanism, Adorno passionately rails at how such discursive appeals to universal humanity is ideology because it "caricatures the equal rights of everything which bears a human face, since it hides from men the unalleviated discriminations of societal power: the differences between hunger and overabundance, between spirit and docile idiocy."

Chastely moved, man lets himself be addressed through Man: it doesn't cost anyone anything. But who ever refuses this appeal gives himself over as non-human to the administrators of the jargon, and can be sacrificed by them, if such a sacrifice is needed ... In the mask of the jargon any self-interested action can give itself the air of public interest, of service to Man. Thus, nothing is done in any serious fashion to alleviate men's suffering and need. Self-righteous humanity, in the midst of a general inhumanity, only intensifies the inhuman state of affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The nihilism of postmodern writers (typified by Lyotard and Baudrillard), in their rejection of totalizing metanarratives, commits the same mistake as the 'modernists' that they are trying to transcend. The postmodern acceptance of the end of history (what Jameson calls "inverted millennialism") is not the transcendence of but the logical end to the Cartesian ego which posits the self as the site of transcendence in its refusal to

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<sup>2</sup> Note the status of 'ancient' and 'religion' - notions of linear progress implicit in this rationality constructs them as mythic and no longer relevant.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Supiot has also pointed out how Biblical law addresses Man as subject whereas scientific law (or rationality) treats him as object and becomes itself the new project of power; Nazi extermination being its apotheosis. "Ontologies of Law," *New Left Review* 13 (Jan/Feb 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 66-67

accept that there are forces beyond man and his control. Their suspicion of anything that reeks of totality conceals from them the true nature of *toU'tQlIti* – which ironically, is the very context they desire. In their haste to transcend, they fail to recognize themselves as historical beings and that what constitutes the social is itself historical (for history is a metaphysical *toU'tQlIti* that exists and develops beyond 'man'), thus they ascribe value to a 'context' which is itself decontextualized because of its ahistorical nature.<sup>5</sup> And as abstractions are by nature totalizing, they recreate the same bad totality they are trying to escape.<sup>6</sup>

## ***II. Revolution of the Ruin***

*toU'tQlIti* is not totalizing (which is monism) for it has no reducible principle; it is the unity of form that reveals contradictions in content, just as contradictions of content reveal a unity in form. Hence we have the constellation of *toU'tQlIti* - ,daI«'lEktIk - History - Consciousness; referring to one implicitly refers to the others, but none can be reduced to the others, nor are they merely levels of commensurability that can be homologized.<sup>7</sup> When the dialectic is arrested, reification congeals into a bad totality which is ideological in nature for it presents the part as the whole. For Lukacs, bourgeois antimony results from the use of "abstract categories of reflection, such as quantity and infinite progression, to conceal the dialectical structure of the historical process in daily life."<sup>8</sup> What is historical becomes "second nature", which entails a forgetting that fetishizes 'new' models and paradigms; bad totalities become mistaken as true *toU'tQlIti*.

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<sup>5</sup> The 'postmodern' fascination with and borrowing of the past is actually a regression to the Romantic fetish of a (selective) past, and imbuing it with a purity and innocence that functioned paradoxically both as a sign to one's own sensitive nature, and as a sign to how far one has progressed.

<sup>6</sup> Jameson in *A Singular Modernity* has expounded the intellectual regression of postmodernism in greater detail and points out the postmodern reliance on essentially modernist categories of the new. He notes that despite Lyotard's repudiation of "grand narratives" or Deleuze's rewriting of past philosophies "in the postcontemporary idiom", they were both "quintessential modernist(s), passionately committed to the eruption of the genuinely, the radically, and dare one even say, the authentically New." (London: Verso, 2002), 4

<sup>7</sup> Just as rationality misunderstands allegory, it also mistakes notions of *toU'tQlIti* and ,daI«'lEktIk in rendering cosmology into methodology.

<sup>8</sup> Gyorgy Lukacs, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 164

The way out of a bad totality is not in rejecting all totalities, but in recognizing the true nature of *toU'tQlIti*. Specters of reification melt away upon the revelation of the historical process that "eliminates the actual autonomy of the objects and the concepts of objects with their resulting rigidity."<sup>9</sup> For Lukacs, the "only decisive weapon" against it is the ability "to see the social totality as a concrete historical totality; to see the reified forms as processes between men; to see the immanent meaning of history that only appears negatively in the contradictions of abstract forms."<sup>10</sup> In order to access *toU'tQlIti*, contradictions that were discursively resolved by ideology and reification must be exploded by *,daI«'lEktIk* in order to recognize them.

*,daI«'lEktIk* reason transcends the level of methodology because it does not "merely direct research, or even pre-judge the mode of appearance of objects ... it defines what the world (human or total) must be like for dialectical knowledge to be possible; it simultaneously elucidates the movement of the real and that of our thoughts, and it elucidates the one by the other."<sup>11</sup> While Hegel authored the terms of the modern Western dialectic, he also enacted its death for it henceforth became mired in his flawed conception. Althusser has contrasted the mystifying character of the Hegelian dialectic, which conceives of contradiction as a hermeneutic and not overdetermined, with the Marxian dialectic where "contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised."<sup>12</sup> Thus Hegel posits his dialectic as an a priori truth where history is governed by the *Welt Geist*, while Marx demonstrates that history is always in development whereby it is possible for man to make his own history although there is no necessary reciprocal future for his actions are always overdetermined.

The *,daI«'lEktIk*, thus, is movement which is opposed to the immortal stasis of reification. The site of immanence and consciousness that is the heart of *,daI«'lEktIk* lies in the boundary between negations which is its essence.<sup>13</sup> While ideology resolves contradictions discursively, bourgeois antimony sets up negations as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 144

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 197

<sup>11</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, "The Dogmatic Dialectic and the Critical Dialectic" in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. (London: NLB, 1976)

<sup>12</sup> Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969)

<sup>13</sup> My use of 'dialectic' does not refer to any specific philosophical formulation; instead it indicates the spirit of *,daI«'lEktIk* which I locate as the historical quest for immanence over imposition.

naturally irresolvable (like the oft-used practice of contrasting pros and cons), any movement thus constitutes a loss. Hence resisting a paradigm invariably validates it.<sup>14</sup> To explode antimony is through the recognition of the contradictory and liminal nature of the boundary.<sup>15</sup> All boundaries are historical constructions – be it the extent of individual power, the borders of nation states, or where the land meets the sea. The site of historical consciousness and true radical critique then, is not in the mere opposition to the dominant powers, but in the liminal zone between the negations – the point is not merely resistance which potentially slides into antimony, but subversion as revelatory immanence by bracketing or exploding contradictions from within. The boundary is *ur-politik*.

An example of such transgression in practice is Brechtian theater which connects immanent critique with praxis through the use of alienation effects that subvert bourgeois theater conventions. For Brecht, bourgeois theater corresponded to the larger society in its constant attempts to hide its constructed nature through the devices of staging which create an illusion of an invisible fourth wall. True consciousness thus begins not in telling but in showing how these naturalized forms are wholly arbitrary through bracketing the boundaries of convention. Lights and backstage paraphernalia, previously concealed, become the set itself, and *gestic* techniques are used to remind the audience that what they are seeing is constructed. Alienation, then, is the site of immanent consciousness as opposed to bourgeois modes of nurture; the former (like all creation myths) is the mode of being, while the latter corresponds to the mode of evolution.<sup>16</sup> The enlightened nature of the Buddha, is not in a Judeo-Christian transcendence, but the immanent revelation of man's historical nature and interconnectedness in *toU'tQlIti*.<sup>17</sup> The true

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<sup>14</sup> Resistance to a paradigm validates it by forming a binary opposition which further sets and defines the epistemic boundaries of the paradigm. This in turn reifies the paradigm's truth value and hence discourse vacillates between the two poles instead of calling epistemic assumptions into question (which are now shared by paradigm and its opposition).

<sup>15</sup> Antimony constructs its boundaries as natural and insurmountable.

<sup>16</sup> While the West has historically appropriated and internalized Darwinian evolution (and its telos) for its ends and establishing its superiority, the theory of evolution is also its demise – particularly the recessive Caucasian gene as evidenced in the offspring of mixed unions. While evolution seems a 'common-sense' (even 'natural') means of understanding the natural and social world, one should always remember that evolution has yet to be able to explain consciousness. Through history, from ancient prophets (such as Buddha) and practices (such as spirit quests) to early Marxist writings, consciousness comes into epiphanic being from rupture and revolution in experience and not from ideological nurture and evolution.

<sup>17</sup> There is a substantive difference between the end of suffering vs. the end of sin.

revolution lies not in the uncritical valorization of the 'new' but in the redemption of the 'old' and 'irrelevant'.<sup>18</sup>

### **III. The Wish, the Promise, or, the desire for Utopia**

For Benjamin, every new means of production has the same dream of transcending the past towards a more equitable society. The wish image, thus, is the collective unconscious that stems from the "collective attempts to transcend as well as to illuminate the incompleteness of the social order of production" that manifests itself in various practices and discourses.<sup>19</sup>

In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch that follows, the latter appears wedded to elements of ur-history, that is, of a classless society. Its experiences, which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective, produce, in their interpenetration with the new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions.<sup>20</sup>

This conception of the wish image is closely allied to Freud's work on dreams where he argues that the images that occur and recur in dreams are the result of unfulfilled desires.<sup>21</sup> Thus the wish images embedded in the practices and discourses of an epoch constitute the condensation and displacement of collective desires; a utopic gesture towards what is lacking. To reveal the wish images of an epoch is to trace the continuity of past desires, its continuation in future epochs, and its systematic denial. Jameson has pointed out that renderings of utopia contain both political and narrative functions.<sup>22</sup> Therefore when Marx undertook his analysis of the political economy of Capital, he was not only explicating the terms of bourgeois economics but also demonstrating how Capital systematically denies its utopic promise to emancipate and achieve equality from the older feudal system – whereby the transmutation of use value to exchange value not only transforms men into labor and goods into commodities, but

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<sup>18</sup> This is not nostalgia but to redeem and learn from what has been forgotten and repressed in the name of 'progress'.

<sup>19</sup> Perry Anderson has also pointed out how utopias have been mired in relations of production by locating its originary impulse in Moore's *Utopia*. "River of Time," *New Left Review* 26 (Mar/Apr 2004)

<sup>20</sup> 1935 exposé of *Konvolut V* cited in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 114

<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 1955)

<sup>22</sup> Frederic Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia" *New Left Review* 25 (Jan/Feb 2004)



also creates new structures of power and inequality.<sup>23</sup> Hence Benjamin's "Ruin", in straddling the boundary between past and present, exposes the dialectical process by liberating the "wish images" of the past which in turn reveal the continual and contingent nature of the present.

#### **IV. Performing Truth**

For rationalism has existed at widely different times and in the most diverse forms... But there are fundamental distinctions to be made, depending on the material on which this rationalism is brought to bear and on the role assigned to it in the comprehensive system of human knowledge and human objectives. What is novel about modern rationalism is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the principle which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society are found to confront mankind. Compared with this, every previous type of rationalism is no more than a partial system.<sup>24</sup>

In "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", Lukacs develops Marx's argument that capital is embedded in the thought structures of bourgeois society; and like capital, modern rationalism has displaced all alternatives to make it appear natural rather than historical. Bourgeois antimony leads to rejection of metaphysics and "positing as the aim of philosophy the understanding of the phenomena of isolated, highly specialized areas by means of abstract rational special systems, perfectly adapted to them and without making the attempt to achieve a unified mastery of the whole realm of the knowable."<sup>25</sup> Hence the problem lies in the forms of thought itself. For Heidegger, ontology has the ability to access the "primordial sources" from which (reified) categories and concepts handed to us were drawn. He saw the need to interrogate 'original' sources because when "tradition becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it 'transmits' is made so inaccessible .... it makes us forget that they have had such an origin."<sup>26</sup> This dialectical concept of rationalism as concealment is expressed by the Heideggerian concept of *gestell* – which is the revealing through ordering that conceals all other forms of revealing, especially that of poesis or immanence.

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<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*

<sup>24</sup> Lukacs, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, 113

<sup>25</sup> Lukacs, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, 120

<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Thinking and *Destruktion*" in *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Dan Latimer (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 127

Due to its form, modern rationalism is perpetually drawing and reifying boundaries and categories without questioning them and itself in its brand of empiricism. While it discursively proclaims the truth of experience, it is the illusion of experience that is its truth value for it pretends to have unmediated access to data which in turn pretends to be unmediated truth. Like the gloves a doctor dons before an examination, it is a mass-produced generic abstraction that distances in its attempt to get closer, separating the examiner from the examinee with its fear of contamination in its quest for pure experience; but the experience is always mediated and abstracted, be it through layers of latex or method.<sup>27</sup> As empiricism operates solely in the domain of the visible (appearance), it can never understand the invisible (essence) that informs and governs the visible – the result is a tautology whereby the absence of studies demonstrating X becomes proof that X does not exist.<sup>28</sup> Extending Merleau-Ponty's argument of coevalness, in which a seer has to exist in the seen in order to see, one can see that empiricism exists in a palindigmatic relationship to experience – it does not reveal experience so much as it reveals its own conceptions about it.<sup>29</sup>

The performance of empiricism is not just restricted to creating a “referential illusion” but its intrinsic narrative constructs a model of linear progress and historical perfectibility.<sup>30</sup> Inconsistencies and conflicts are neatly resolved, and the end of history is (re)enacted in countless literature reviews in their implicit claims to transcend the limitations of the past, and bring humanity one step closer to enlightenment and deliverance from ignorance and suffering. This utopic promise however can never be attained because empiricism (like capital, fascism and other arrested dialectics) is predicated upon the consistent denial of that promise; for the attainment of its goal will nullify its very existence. This is the mode materialized in dramatic serializations where

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<sup>27</sup> Just as a telephoto lens gives the illusion of getting closer to the subject by occluding the view.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of the dialectic of the visible and invisible, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968)

<sup>29</sup> The *palindigm* is the utterance that negates itself; a dialectical reversal of meaning whereby the utterance reveals the self, not in the sense of a Freudian slip, but that in some instances it constitutes a *gestic* element that reveals its own internal contradictions. For example, calling someone selfish because he will not accede to your demands constitutes such a *palindigm* as it reveals the contradiction of your own selfish nature which in turn brackets the notion of selfishness itself.

<sup>30</sup> The term ‘referential illusion’ is used by Barthes to critique the practices in which the mediation of the writer is made invisible, where history is written as if its actors speak for themselves. Peter Osborne considers such narratives that gesture towards telos and transcendence as being the zeitgeist of the modern. [“The Discourse of History,” *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981); “Modernity is a Qualitative not Chronological category,” *New Left Review* 192 (Mar/Apr 1992)]

the attainment of the narrative objective terminates the progression of the narrative – thus the notion of ‘progress’ itself is corrupt for it is based on the very denial of the goal that it seeks, and thereby has to appear transcendent to hide its essentially intranscendent nature. The very concept of ‘cutting edge’ is symptomatic of this arrested dialectic where process becomes product. When process becomes reified as product, notions such as progress and exchange value acquire a transcendental truth value above all which rationalizes and justifies abuses and oppressions in their name. In its rejection of the metaphysical, empiricism institutes its own metaphysical categories and the world begins to be proceed forth upon these abstract models.<sup>31</sup> Even before Baudrillard coined his notion of the hyperreal, we were already living in a third order simulacra run on and run by the metaphysics of progress, supply and demand.

Empiricism can never know toU'tQlIti, not just in its single-minded pursuit of a single aspect of appearance, but that it is mired in identity thinking whose logic nullifies any understanding of ,daI«'lEktIk. If we accept the basic premise that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, then  $1 + 1 = 2$  cannot be true.<sup>32</sup> Mathematics, after all, is the distillation of identity thinking and is predicated upon the single, syllogistic truth of the equal sign (=); it cannot operate in nor conceive of the field of meanings and truths that is in  $\neq$  (= is the mode of identity and logic,  $\neq$  is the mode of dialectical reason).<sup>33</sup> Empiricism can never grasp totality because it presumes a necessary correspondence between the parts and the larger whole.<sup>34</sup> Jameson points out the fallacy of this insistent effort “to deduce the larger social forms from the smaller ones and to build up notions and models of the collective out of primary accounts of individual actions and immediate face-to-face encounters, as though these ‘simple’ elements and forms, added together

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<sup>31</sup> Science was doomed in its attempt to herald a new regime of absolute truth, for its form is fundamentally a search for singular origins (God) like displaced Religion.

<sup>32</sup> The notion that the whole is larger than the sum of its parts is essentially an argument of quality vs. quantity.

<sup>33</sup> The problems with empiricism stem from its faith and reliance on forms of identity thinking. This becomes especially problematic in contemporary practice when mathematical models are employed to simulate social reality whereby the social reality is measured based on how well it fits the model. This is a key critique in Jean Baudrillard's “The Precession of Simulacra” in *Simulacra and Simulation*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994)

<sup>34</sup> It is precisely this mode of thought that renders Man as Machine, as if a mere complex of chemical reactions and electrical interactions is an adequate explanation for consciousness.

and combined in more elaborate ways, would somehow directly yield the forms of the 'complex'.<sup>35</sup>

But the dialectic already knew, and contemporary thought has rediscovered, some fundamental incommensurability between the individual and the collective - that there was a gap and a leap between the two; that no careful Cartesian procedures could ever build the bridge from the logic of individual experience to that very different logic of the collective and the social; that no ingenious analysis of the social back into its individual components could ever conceptually master the properly dialectical paradox whereby the whole is always more (or less) than its individual parts.<sup>36</sup>

When Marx formulates his theory of value in *Capital*, he demonstrates it is identity thinking that transmutes quality into quantity, transforming objects into commodities, and people into labor. Identity thinking by nature creates binary oppositions for what is not "this" becomes "that".<sup>37</sup> In conceptualizing totality, identity thinking expresses the dialectic as  $f(x) + f(-x)$ . This transforms into  $f(x) + (-f(x))$  or  $f(x) - f(x)$  i.e. negation becomes nullification. Even worse, as  $f(x) - f(x) = 0$ , we have the final transformation into  $f(x) = f(x)$ , where negation 'logically' becomes identity itself.<sup>38</sup> Identity thinking, in creating an antimony between quality and quantity (even if they both refer to the same unified object), presumes negation as a simple mirror, a quantitative reflection on an axis; whereas in the dialectical process that recognizes the quantitative and qualitative differences posit  $f(y)$ , or  $f(x')$ , or  $f(x' + y)$  as negations.<sup>39</sup> The former sees negation as nihilism and can never understand , daI«'lEktIk or toU'tQlIti, while the latter acknowledges the creative power of destruction – just as volcanic slopes and flood plains are both the sites of fertility and death. The recent philosophies of Heidegger's *destruktion* and Derrida's deconstruction have also situated creation in

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<sup>35</sup> Fredric Jameson, "The Theoretical Hesitation: Benjamin's Sociological Predecessor." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999), 271

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> The binary form is also at the heart of digital form. Likewise the degrees of "this" and "that" are not understood as a continuum but approximated by nesting binary oppositions.

<sup>38</sup> Identity thinking controls nature by abstracting it into a mirror of itself which manifests itself in the monoculture of crops and thought with its rotations of sanctioned diversity where only that which is deemed beneficial for the survival of the system is allowed. This example also shows why resistance to a paradigm under modern rationality ends up validating the paradigm itself.

<sup>39</sup> My use of  $f(x)$  notation is metonymic rather than mathematical. Under mathematical notation  $f(-x) = -f(x)$  is not true under the conditions when  $x$  is raised to an even power. Identity thinking fixates on values rather than the larger truth and assumes the former to be adequate expressions of the latter. Hence it fails to see my central argument that the function of  $f(-x)$  is always a reflection of  $f(x)$  on an axis (not necessarily the  $x$  and  $y$  axes) always holds true.

negation even if they disavow their intrinsically dialectical approach. While destruction is not necessary for creation, for creation comes into being like a seed, destruction is necessary to clear the deadwood that chokes new growth.<sup>40</sup>

The thesis form, then, is corrupt in its alliance with the creeds and practices of empiricism.<sup>41</sup> This historical form has been reified to appear natural, yet it is upheld as the bearer of truth; its very proof lies in its form which reproduces it. None of the great social texts by Marx, Nietzsche, etc. would have passed muster because the abstraction of the form extirpates passion – revolutionary insight is reduced to a passionless social consciousness which does not threaten the status quo, like the bourgeoisie who donate to Third World charities but do not change their consumption habits that contribute to such suffering. Appeals to ‘complexity’ as well as ‘grounded’ approaches proclaim an ahistorical transcendental ‘immanent’ truth that passes for true poesis which hides the abstraction of the form. The great insight of Adorno, Brecht and Schoenberg is that form is as ideological, if not more so, than content. As the lessons from Stalin and Mao have shown, even dialectics becomes reified into didactics under social realism and other bourgeois modes of nurturing consciousness – the language of emancipation invariably turns into its opposite. All reification is extirpation for the abstract models hide the actual human relations, just as the commodity form conceals the relations of production. True consciousness has to be immanent and derived from (com)passion.<sup>42</sup> The denigration of passion in modern rationality, whereby experience is reduced to mere subjectivity, reveals the Enlightenment’s fatal contradiction – that its humanism is predicated upon the non-human (objectivity).<sup>43</sup>

This bad faith in form resides not only in the thesis but in the very practices of art and academia, two social spheres who have variously proclaimed (or at least

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<sup>40</sup> How does dialectical ‘destruction’ differ from that by modern rationalism? The difference lies in the former seeking redemption through recovering an UnExpressed history, while the latter bulldozes history in its belief that all past is corrupt and posits its laws as natural law.

<sup>41</sup> The thesis form is a monad of the telos of modern rationalism. Its linear construction whereby conflict is discursively harmonized, as well as its fetish and fallacy of references (having a ‘sufficient’ number and ‘up to date’), point to the form as a manifestation of the ethos of progress and quantification, an example of an auratic gesture. The form also arrests immanent understanding by merely telling, as if appearance is sufficient proof of essence.

<sup>42</sup> I write (com)passion to flag the necessary coexistence of both passion and compassion; having only one dimension renders any consciousness merely aesthetic.

<sup>43</sup> In *Lost Dimension*, Virilio sees the increasing abstraction of measures in our current age as symptomatic of the further denigration of human experience. For example the meter is now defined by a fraction of the distance of the earth’s meridian, and the second is the time taken for a pulse of light to travel a fixed distance. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991)

discursively assigned) the elevation of humanity as their mission. The specialization in fields of knowledge and practices and the discursive separation of art and academia above all other social spheres not only sets up an antimony between theory and practice but have also denied intellectuals to itself. Hence most fail to see themselves as historical beings rooted in privilege and structures of domination. Thus artists and academics reproduce themselves by latching onto a recognizable style or argument and repeat it with calculated variations.<sup>44</sup> Merely using the language of emancipation does not make one an emancipator for the form turns it into mere jargon; or as Adorno puts it, "reified consciousness does not end where the concept of reification has a place of honor."<sup>45</sup> Adorno warns that while this jargon "overflows with the pretense of deep human emotion, it is just as standardized as the world that it officially negates; the reason for this lies partly in its mass success, partly in the fact that it posits its message automatically, through its mere nature. Thus the jargon bars the message from the experience which is to ensoul it."<sup>46</sup> Everything is reduced to mere (in)difference.<sup>47</sup> The importance of a dialectical understanding of society is not to "turn structures into ordered schematas, which could be applied to sociological findings as completely, continually and non-contradictorily as possible", but also to be continually reflect upon itself to avoid a fall into dogmatism.<sup>48</sup> For in order for critical thought to be truly critical, it must first be critical of itself.

To paraphrase Marx, intellectuals have hitherto only represented the world in various ways. The point is to change it.

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<sup>44</sup> This commodity form is justified under the discourse of a career where the specialization it entails opens up opportunities; but a career also locks one into a labor relation whose simultaneous restriction of alternatives contravenes the promises of choice and opportunity in Capital. The 'commonsense' counterargument that everyone does it reveals the valorization of *vox populi* arguments in identity thinking where truth resides in quantity.

<sup>45</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" {trans. Dennis Redmon} available at <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/AdornoSocAddr.html>

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 6

<sup>47</sup> The deviant is asked to normalize, to 'adapt' in keeping with the rubric of evolution (telos); yet no one recognizes how this runs counter to the ethos of human power – passive adaptation is inimical to active self-determination, and one merely adapts to an unjust system instead of changing it.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, *Late Capitalism*

## I. DOA: Dead On Arrival (or, Digital Ontology Arrested)

In *The Reconfigured Eye*, William Mitchell distinguishes between analog and digital media based on the understanding that the former is continuous while the latter is discrete. Hence a photograph is an analog representation of the “differentiation of space in a scene” that varies “spatially and tonally on a continuum”, while a digital image is “encoded by subdividing the picture plane into a finite Cartesian grid of cells where fine details and smooth curves are approximated to the grid and continuous tonal gradients are broken up in discrete steps.”<sup>1</sup> He claims that the reproductive and mutable nature of the digital image lies in its discrete nature because the “continuous spatial and tonal variation of analog pictures is not exactly replicable, so such images cannot be transmitted or copied without degradation” whereas discrete states can be replicated precisely; hence “a digital image that is a thousand generations away from the original is indistinguishable in quality from any one of its progenitors.”<sup>2</sup> For Mitchell, this revolution in technology emancipates the camera from its status as an ideal Cartesian instrument, mired in the standardization and stabilization of the image making process to serve the purposes of industrial capital and science. Instead it now becomes a medium that “privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity” which makes it “more felicitously adapted to the diverse projects of our postmodern era” by exposing the “aporias in photography’s construction of the visual world, to deconstruct the very ideas

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 6

of photographic objectivity and closure, and to resist what has become an increasingly sclerotic pictorial tradition.”<sup>3</sup>

Writings on the digital image have typically asserted the primacy of the binary code that governs all digital media, their authors resting their arguments on the binary nature of the code which they take as the essence of the digital. Like George Landow's *Hypertext 2.0*, Mitchell's *The Reconfigured Eye* has acquired a quasi-canonical status in its rich technical description and celebration of digital technology; equating 'revolutionary' changes in technical forms to changes in perception and world order. But while they superficially appear to offer an ontology of the digital (and thus its essence), their uncritical valorizations couched in fashionable jargon such as 'rhizome', 'interactivity', and 'active user' arrests the very ontology they presume to offer by accepting appearance as sufficient proof of essence.<sup>4</sup> Kevin Robbins, one of the few dissenting voices, notes that a great deal of what passes for commentary or analysis in such writings amounts to "little more than a simple and unthinking progressivism, unswerving in its belief that the future is always superior to the past, and firm in its conviction that this superior future is a spontaneous consequence of technological development" which enables technological development to appear transcendent and autonomous rather than embedded in social relations. Furthermore, the framing of 'new media' as revolution "obscure the nature and significance of very real continuities" by intensifying the contrasts between past and future.<sup>5</sup>

In "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography", Lev Manovich opposes Mitchell's central thesis that the difference between a digital image and a photograph "is grounded in fundamental physical characteristics that have logical and cultural consequences" by arguing that Mitchell's arguments are divorced from the present contexts of the technology.<sup>6</sup> Against Mitchell's charge that the digital image is perfectly reproducible by its discrete nature, Manovich correctly points out that the large amounts of data generated by digitization requires data to be compressed in order for it to be stored and transmitted efficiently – the most common being forms of "lossy compression", where

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>4</sup> George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997)

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Robbins, "Will Image Move Us Still?" in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister (London: Routledge, 1995), 30

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *Reconfigured Eye*, 4



selected information is deleted to generate smaller file sizes.<sup>7</sup> Hence a pure copy does not exist as more information is lost when a compressed file is resaved.<sup>8</sup> Although Manovich agrees with Mitchell that a digital image is composed of a finite number of pixels, he notes that the resolution of existing consumer imaging applications is already more than sufficient such that the pixels do not appear; the technology has “reached the point where a digital image can easily contain much more information than anybody would ever want.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, he critiques Mitchell’s ahistorical understanding of photographic practice whereby Mitchell equates the codes of modern pictorial realism (exemplified by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston) with the essence of ‘traditional’ photography and conveniently ignores the rich tradition in manipulated imagery that had preceded it, thereby aligning the practices of montage and collage with the essence of digital imaging.

Yet Manovich commits the same fallacy as Mitchell by imputing a telos of technology (which suggests that existing conflicts are only a limitation of current technology) and failing to question the basis of the technology itself. Such discourses of revolution with their purported “end of history” is symptomatic of the “inverted millennialism” of our ‘postmodern’ times.<sup>10</sup> Michelle Henning critiques this metaphysic of progress implicit in academic and art discourse (with its attendant utopian and dystopian prophecy) and its claims about the newness of digital imaging, and thus its ability to “precipitate radical changes in perception, in consciousness, and ultimately in society” rather than examining ways where there might be repetition or continuity of meaning or use.<sup>11</sup> Symptomatic of this is the view that while “the golden age of the electronic, post-biological culture may be far ahead, but the world of digital photography is opening up,

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<sup>7</sup> Lev Manovich, “The Paradoxes of Digital Photography” in *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, ed.s Hubertus von Amelnunxen, et. al (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1996)

<sup>8</sup> Manovich fails to point out the true paradox of this process – that digital technology is proclaimed as yielding more perfect and efficient media forms (such as the clarity of sound in CDs, or the ability to store hundreds of images on a memory chip), yet this is achieved by systematically deleting information; digital perfection constitutes a loss.

<sup>9</sup> Manovich, *The Paradoxes of Digital Photography*, 60

<sup>10</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” *New Left Review* 146 (Jul/Aug 1984)

<sup>11</sup> Michelle Henning, “Digital Encounters: Mythical pasts and electronic presence” in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister (London: Routledge, 1995), 219-220

just as the world of analog photography as it has been practiced is, if not closing down, then being absorbed within the digital discourse.”<sup>12</sup>

While photographic discourse is increasingly reframed in relation to the digital (one no longer speaks of photography but refer to it as chemical or analog photography), the ways in which digital technology interpolates itself into existing non-digital practices to legitimate itself are elided. For example, a recent advertisement by Canon for its professional line of digital cameras with a caption that reads “Is this image film or digital? We can’t tell either”, exemplifies this interpolation by reassuring the professional photographer that digital technology can now deliver image quality indistinguishable from film.<sup>13</sup> Many practices such as the ISO settings on a digital camera are in fact a holdover from the older technology of film. They are meaningless inasmuch as ISO numbers are a standard measure of film’s sensitivity to light – films with higher ISO numbers are more sensitive to light (as the multiple of the ISO number is a factor of film sensitivity). Cranking up the ISO settings on a digital camera does not make the CCD chip (which records image data) more sensitive to light, but merely simulates its outcome by increasing the voltage gain across its components. Furthermore, the widespread acceptance of digital photography only came about when inkjet prints were able to simulate the look and surface of an ‘analog’ photograph; the oft-used marketing moniker “photorealistic” reveals how the ability to reproduce the look and feel of ‘analog’ photography is upheld as an ideal as opposed to finding its own terms of expression. Despite the appeals to a post-biological, cyborg subject in the age of digital technology, it is paradoxical that the structure and form of digital imaging is actually closer to the human perceptual apparatus (if not a direct correspondence) than the film camera. The supposed rupture of the biological subject from the advent of digital technology is predicated upon metaphors in science and literature where the camera is likened to the human eye and vice versa; thus a dramatic change in camera technology presumably

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<sup>12</sup> Roy Ascott, “Photography at the Interface” In *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 166

<sup>13</sup> This is because historically the digital image was distinguishable from film in its lower image quality and limited color rendition. Something which the Canon ad copy points out, “Canon digital technology has blurred the line between film and digital. With the introduction of the EOS-1Ds, we’ve erased it. In fact, professionals all over the world who have grown to rely on Canon digital are now using this incredibly detailed, accurate and rugged camera in situations where they used to use only film.”

sunders this relationship.<sup>14</sup> This assumption is problematic on two levels. First, it assumes the camera is an adequate and natural expression of the human eye rather than a historical rendering mired in a certain social-political context.<sup>15</sup> Douwe Draaisma has located the origins of this model to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the writings of Kepler and Descartes that utilize the camera obscura as an analogy for the eye.<sup>16</sup> Second, it conceals the contradiction that the form and operation of the digital camera is actually closer to the human perceptual apparatus than that of a film camera. Both the eye and the digital camera have a limited light sensitivity and cannot accumulate light impressions like film, and the way an image is formed on a digital camera parallels the functioning of the human eye – photons of light are focused via a lens onto photo-receptors (be it the rods and cones at the back of the eye or the diode arrays of the CCD) which emit electrical impulses that are processed by the brain (be it human or electronic).<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore Manovich's counterargument has technical inaccuracies – more technically proficient writers have demonstrated that current applications have yet to surpass traditional photography.<sup>18</sup> Manovich's criticism of Mitchell's ahistorical

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<sup>14</sup> One of the earliest associations of eye and camera can be found in Descartes 1637' *Optics* where he drew a diagram comparing both. These eye/camera metaphors persist today in various writings such as Dziga Vertov's *Kino-eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and in biology texts. For example in Levine & Miller's *Biology: Discovering Life* "[The eyes] focus by moving [the lens] back and forth in front of the retina, in much the same way as we might focus the inflexible glass lens of a camera..." (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1991), 929; and in Guyton & Hall's *Human Physiology and Mechanisms of Disease*, "The eye... is optically equivalent to the usual photographic camera. It has a lens system, a variable aperture system (the pupil), and a retina that corresponds to the film." (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1997), 400

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Stafford in *Devices of Wonder* demonstrates how the camera/eye metaphor was ideological in nature; the "perspective glass" being a particularly obvious example where the viewer looks through a tube with a faceted lens at one end and a pinhole. When an engraving is viewed through this device, the faceted lens creates an image from fragments of different parts of the engraving; hence an engraving of the busts of twelve Ottoman rulers becomes a portrait of King Louis XIII through this device. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 187-188. I would also locate this as the shift from interpreting the archive as representation of experience, to index of experience.

<sup>16</sup> Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 104-108

<sup>17</sup> Draaisma notes that the invention of photography had a dramatic effect on the understanding of perception and memory, whereby the photographic camera became the most advanced optical instrument and human memory "became a photographic plate, prepared for the recording and reproduction of visual experience." (*Metaphors of Memory*, 120) By suggesting a memory that "forgets nothing, that contains a perfect permanent, record of our visual experience" (*Ibid.*, 121), the immutability and transcendence of the archive became valorized.

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Norman Koren's "Digital Cameras vs Film" available <http://www.normankoren.com/Tutorials/MTF7.html>

understanding of photographic practice applies equally to himself in basing his arguments on image quality (like many 'digital media' writers) exclusively on the 35mm film camera, despite the presence of other higher quality formats still widespread in commercial and scientific applications. Against such ilk, Geoffrey Batchen charges them with using facile, reified models of photography, noting that,

For a start, photography has never been any one technology; its nearly two centuries of development have been marked by numerous, competing instances of technological innovation and obsolescence, without any threat being posed to the survival of the medium itself. In any case, even if we continue to identify photography with certain archaic technologies, such as camera and film, those technologies are themselves the embodiment of the idea of photography, or, more accurately, of a persistent economy of photographic desires and concepts.<sup>19</sup>

Hence Manovich fails to call into question why, if the state of current digital technology is sufficient for most users and purposes, do researchers and manufacturers continue to push for increasingly higher resolution products. Is it merely a marketing strategy or does it express a utopian wish image, a "persistent economy of photographic desires and concepts"?

In the desire for a revolutionary discourse, writers such as Mitchell have reified the digital image as being purely binary and discrete on the basis of its binary code and contrast it with the 'continuous' non-digital image. This argument is based on the assumption that there is an "indefinite amount of information in a continuous-tone photograph, so enlargement usually reveals more details but yields a fuzzier and grainier picture" while a digital image "has precisely limited spatial and tonal resolution and contains a fixed amount of information" so that when enlarged to the point where its "gridded microstructure" becomes visible "further enlargements will reveal nothing new: the discrete pixels retain their crisp, square shapes and their original colors, and they simply become more prominent."<sup>20</sup> Yet Mitchell contradicts this claim that there is an indefinite amount of information in a continuous-tone photograph by stating in a footnote that,

This is not to say that a photograph has unlimited resolving power. Grain appears and the image begins to break up at high levels of enlargement .... The point is that photographic images degrade gradually with

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, "Ectoplasm: Photography in the Digital Age" in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 19

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, *Reconfigured Eye*, 4-5

enlargement, and although resolution can be measured approximately, it cannot be specified exactly.<sup>21</sup>

It is the separation of theory, technique and practice that leads to such facile conclusions derived from abstraction rather than experience. Any photographer who has worked in a darkroom has used a grain focuser (which is a simple device made up of a mirror and some lenses) to enlarge their prints. Before placing the photographic paper at the base of the enlarger, the photographer first uses the grain focuser to ensure his enlargement is at optimum sharpness by focusing on the film grain of the negative itself. Prior to digital technology, photographers had already been pushing analog, "continuous" photography to its absolute limits of enlargement in their use of the grain focuser where all one sees are discrete grains of silver. The silver grain is the limit for the photograph just as the pixel is the limit for the digital image; the difference is the digital image relies on image processing techniques and computers to reveal its discrete nature. Thus the association of the digital image as binary and the analog image as continuous is overextended. The analog image is made up of discrete silver or dye particles, it cannot be continuous for an object cannot be simultaneously present and absent, nor exist in a continuum between presence and absence. This is symptomatic of the structural fantasy of (empiricist) origin where the whole is assumed to be a simple expression from or the sum of its parts. But it is a false totality whose models do not correspond to the reality, for it harmonizes the incommensurability of levels through abstraction. Just as they have failed to grasp the analog photo, they have also failed to understand the digital photo in their specious transposition of the binary code as its essence which leads to claims that all representational forms "are leveled to the algorithmic manipulation of binary code. All space becomes an abstract computational space."<sup>22</sup> For all their discussions on digital technology and computers, these writers have somehow managed to forget that the binary code of computers originated from Boolean algebra which is the perfect expression of Cartesian abstraction where everything is reduced to presence/absence. How can the digital be post Cartesian if its very basis is predicated upon Cartesian principles? This algebra became the basis of all modern computers because it could be represented by electrical pulses. Thus the binary or boolean code is a code without meaning because it is the equivalent of the atomic level for the digital image; the digital image is not binary because its atomic level is the binary code, just as one does not

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<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *Reconfigured Eye*, 228

<sup>22</sup> David Norman Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 211

deduce human behavior from cell behavior. From this flawed assumption, we have the equally specious argument that digital media is easy to manipulate and intermix with different forms (such as audio, image, text, and video) because they share the same binary code. This is akin to the alchemist fantasy that transmutation is possible simply because everything is made up of the same atomic particles.

Instead of conceiving the digital as binary code, writers such as Timothy Binkley have argued on the basis of phenomenal perception that the digital is the loss of referentiality and materiality. They recognize that the alliance of the binary nature of the digital signal with the discontinuous nature of the media is a fallacy despite the temptation to "think that somehow what makes an image digital are the numbers that underlie it because they ultimately determine the criteria for its appearance and establish its identity"; this is because digital media is never experienced as discrete but perceptually reconstituted as continuous, just as one never experiences the printed image in newspapers and magazines as discrete halftones, or the television image as clusters of phosphors.<sup>23</sup> For Binkley, the digital image is an oxymoron because an image "is an appearance that is inherently visible" but the numbers that constitute the digital image are invisible abstractions. Hence Binkley locates the digital image in the frame buffer, which is the memory space of a computer where data is temporarily stored for display on a monitor.<sup>24</sup> His argument is based on the technical principle that the frame buffer is the mediating step for data to move from one interface to another (e.g. from scanner to screen), and that the only way to control an image is through manipulating the buffer contents. Thus, the digital image is as ephemeral as the frame buffer.<sup>25</sup>

Laura Marks critiques such associations of the digital image with immateriality by arguing via the quantum physics of Heisenberg, Bohr, and Schrödinger that electronic images are still an index of a physical process, even if not of an original object.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy Binkley, "Digital Dilemmas" in *Digital Image - Digital Cinema: Siggraph '90 Art Show Catalog*. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990), 14

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>25</sup> However this line of argument confuses the medium with the surface. Just as a rainbow requires the materiality of suspended water droplets, all digital media require a material substrate for otherwise it is incomplete, and in fact does not exist without it. In the end it commits the same structural fallacy of writers who read the digital through its binary code, by reading the immateriality of the digital image through its electronic signals.

<sup>26</sup> While novel, Marks' approach still commits the structural fantasy of an essential nature of those she critiques as her argument is predicated upon the materiality of electron advanced by quantum physics.

Instead, she separates the digital from the non-digital by the possibility of tracing a physical path from the object represented, "to the light that reflects off it, to the photographic emulsion or cathode ray tube that the light hits, to the resulting image."<sup>27</sup> Marks (wrongly) asserts that this path is not traceable in digital imaging, or an additional step is required to convert "the image into data that can then be manipulated, and thereby breaking the link between image and physical referent." She sees this untraceability as leading to fears that "the semiotic foundation of photographic images in the real is thought to be destroyed in digital media." Yet Marks' arguments assume (like Binkley, Manovich and Mitchell) the digital is unreal without questioning why the analog is considered objective (and the wish image of an objective image); there is blindness to mediation in existing literature from Bazin to Benjamin to Barthes and beyond. Symptomatic of the separation of theory and practice, theorists have hitherto fantasized aspects of photographic practice but any conscious photographer knows that the entire process is mediated from the moment they release the shutter; the choice in lens aperture and shutter speed, the perspective distortion of lens, the different color characteristics of film emulsions, and their modification in processing by choices in development times and chemicals. All these just to produce a negative or transparency, and I have not even described the mediating processes involved in framing the view or producing an enlargement. The image was never objective; people have only believed it so.<sup>28</sup> At the end of the day, digital imaging does not fracture reality so much as expose how that reality is taken a priori; its bias of the (eternal) Object and the seduction of Image (mimesis).

Ironically, the best exposition of digital and analog systems comes from Anthony Wilden who wrote before the advent of digital media. He specified the analog as the precise mapping of continuums onto "differences of magnitude, frequency, distribution, pattern, and the like", whereas the digital codes differences into distinctions and

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<sup>27</sup> Laura U. Marks, "How Electrons Remember," *Millenium Film Journal* 34 (Fall 1999)

<sup>28</sup> The construction of the objective photographic image stems in part by the inhuman nature of (and the abstraction by) the apparatus which corresponds to Enlightenment epistemology. This in turn conceals how objectivity is itself a subjective construction. Don Ihde in *Bodies in Technology* has sketched out how science and epistemology had increasingly privileged sight as loci of truth in exclusion of the other senses. The invention and rapid acceptance of photography as truth and documentation reveals how entrenched this was by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

oppositions and thus can only precise about boundaries.<sup>29</sup> Unlike current writers who posit analog and digital systems as exclusive or antagonistic, he argued that all forms of communication employ analog and digital elements at some level in a total system – and proceeds to work through their joint manifestations in phenomena ranging from cell communication to language. Wilden’s elegant example of a thermostat is particularly instructive in illustrating how the analog and digital coexist at different levels in the same system. A thermostat in its simplest form consists of a metal bar that expands and contracts continually as the temperature changes (analog); as the temperature increases, the metal bar expands until it reaches the corresponds to the setting on the temperature dial, whereupon it breaks the circuit to the heating element (digital on/off). As temperature decreases, the metal bar contracts and loses contact with the switch and the current is restored to the heating element. Thus the difference between a digital and analog code is more than discrete vs. continuous; a digital code is “outside the sender and receiver and mediates their relationship”, while an analog code “is the relationship which mediates them.”<sup>30</sup> It is this mediating relationship of the digital that transforms quality into quantity; the image quality is now measured by luminance and reflectance values, while the sound quality is governed by sampling frequencies.

Arguments surrounding digital media are also flawed in their failure to define what exactly the digital image is – is the digital image one taken by a digital camera, or an analog photo scanned into a computer, or an image entirely generated by the computer; i.e. the digital image paradoxically exists on an analog continuum of competing technologies and forms. By linking the analog to the physical and the digital to the ‘virtual’, such arguments are based on a superficial understanding (predicated upon technical attributes of the media) and on an abstraction of digital imaging which is itself an ahistorical understanding. If we accept the argument that digital media is binary or discrete, then digital technology is nothing revolutionary for by that definition the telegraph is the earliest form of digital media. Nor would the discrete pixel nature of the image be sufficient grounds for revolution as both the halftones of the news photo, and the phosphors of the television screen would have preceded it by decades. Television’s composite signal is in fact made up of a combination of digital and analog signals – yet no theorist at that time was problematizing the implications of an interpellated, binary-

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange*. 2nd ed. (London: Tavistock, 1980), 169

<sup>30</sup> Wilden, *System and Structure*, footnote 173



analog cyborg subject. The argument that the digital constitutes data that is not analogous to its referent is similarly writ in water for video was already converting light into magnetic impulses on tape. When one casts off the discourse of revolution of digital technology, we see that there is nothing technically new about digital imaging. Even by its contemporary definition, digital imaging has existed for decades in far more sophisticated forms such as the radio telescopes and unmanned probes used by astronomers. The discourse of digital imaging as revolution edits these out for its own purposes, thus situating the origins of the digital revolution in the late 90s (rather than the first introduction of consumer digital cameras in the 80s by Sony) to coincide with the new millennia (and 'postmodern' thought). The history of the market has become natural history.<sup>31</sup> As John Caldwell notes, "new media, by its very name, perpetuates one long-standing myth about technology: that the advent of any new technology inevitably brings with it marked change ... (however) commercial interests typically build their marketing cases and promotional campaigns on promises of radical change and therefore discontinuity with the past."<sup>32</sup>

The delineation of what constitutes digital and analog is itself an epistemic binarity and boundary. By failing to call those categories into question, 'new media' theorists have failed to recognize them as historical constructions and reified the boundaries drawn around the present, the future, and the past – the explanation itself becomes the model, the model itself becomes reality. Thus the discourse itself becomes digital by giving a choice of either an uncritical embrace or outright rejection which creates an ideological unconscious of the system that hides real continuities and contradictions. Theorists will do very well to heed Anthony Wilden's cautionary reminder that "what we decide to characterize as analog or as digital in any given ensemble of communication is dependent on how we have methodologically drawn a boundary around the system we are studying".

Like the question of distinguishing system and environment, the distinction between analog and digital depends very much upon the way the distinction is defined for any particular system of explanation or level

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<sup>31</sup> Fred Ritchin is one of the few writers who acknowledge the Sony Mavica although he did not incorporate it into his analysis [*In our Own Image* (New York: Aperture, 1999)]. Another historical blindspot is scanning technology which was the first successful consumer digital imaging technology; yet there is a paucity of research and analyses in the early 90s on the problems of the technology e.g. counterfeiting documents, doctoring photographs etc.

<sup>32</sup> John Caldwell, Introduction in *New Media: Theories and Practices* ed. Anna Everett & John Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), xx

of system or set of circumstances ... we must not forget that we are talking about models constructed for the purpose of explanation, not about reality.<sup>33</sup>

What then is the essence of the digital? Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* provocatively asserts, and then shows that there is nothing technological about technology. In the process he demonstrates there is an incommensurability of levels, that the essence of the larger whole is neither a simple abstraction nor relation from its parts. The essence of the digital thus cannot be merely 'digital'. If Heidegger locates the essence of technology as a will to power located in *gestell*, what then is the will to power or the wish image of the digital image?

The real essence of the digital image is a form of *gestell* that manifests itself in the archivic grid – which is the archive whose form is the grid. Nicholas Blomley has noted the historical alliance of grid with Western property regimes and its relation to discourses of the frontier and survey – the cartographic revolution was not just the discovery and acceptance of new techniques, but a way of seeing and ordering the world. The naturalization of the grid causes it to be treated as “abstract, objective, and prepolitical by virtue of its spatiality” and thus appears a priori.<sup>34</sup> The grid is a violent inclusion for it subsumes everything under it, nothing can be excluded. Thus the grid is a territorialization through the definition of boundaries that establish a referent relationship between the grid enclosures – the grid is intrinsically indexical (e.g. A1, B13, G2) where everything is rendered pla(ne/in). Rosalind Krauss describes the grid as the aesthetic form par excellence of modernism that both spatializes and silences by covering over contradictions so that they appear to go away; its persistence and “mythic power” lying in its ability to appear as an unmediated access to the real.<sup>35</sup>

Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Wilden, *System and Structure*, 178

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas K Blomley, “Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 1 (2003), 132

<sup>35</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Grids” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist myths*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

Just as Blomley locates the grid in ordinary relations of power, Derrida traces the origin of the archive to the Greek *archon*, a superior magistrate who ensured physical security and possessed the right to make or represent the law.<sup>37</sup> Like the grid, the archive is a "consignation (that) aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration ... there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate, or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together."<sup>38</sup> While an archive contains indexical impulses by cataloging information into categories, a grid contains archival impulses in its homogenization of space which puts into effect boundaries and exchange relationships. Both represent the abstraction of experience and its substitution by its representation. Thus the archival grid that underlies digital technology enables the database form in its centralization or gathering together of disparate data (archive) that are indexed through constructing relationships within and between them (grid). Hence the difference between the digital image and the analog photo is not in its discrete nature for both are discrete at the particulate level, but in the way it is ordered. Whereas the arrangement of silver grains on a photographic emulsion is random, the arrangement of bits and pixels in the digital image is ordered on Cartesian principles. This is why an analog reproduction appears to lose detail because there is no underlying grid to ensure an exact one-to-one mapping that ensures the "perfect" reproducibility of the digital image.<sup>39</sup> This archival grid is the principle behind all aspects of digital technology; the movement of the cursor on the screen is achieved by mapping the x,y co-ordinates of a mouse, text entry is predicated on a keyboard which has mapped every key to a signal, the pixels of a screen and CCD are organized on a grid (which is why the digital image appears as discrete blocks under extreme enlargement), and the digital file (as well as the file system) has indices to ensure access and interpretation of data. Yet the grid is nothing new, it is after all the basis of engraving which was the dominant form of reproduction prior to the advent of photography. Thus, it is not the binary code but the grid's indexical nature that enables the digital image to be reproduced and manipulated, mixed into hypermedia and interactivity, and simulated; for all these operations rely on

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>39</sup> My use of grid extends beyond the demarcation of grid squares, but to the indexical impulse that enables all elements in a grid to be referred to that manifests itself in various ways (of which the grid square is but one).

the underlying grid. This 'virtual', 'post-Cartesian' space is really based on most Cartesian principles.

In the archivic grid, we have the dovetailing of the technical principles of the digital image with the penultimate expression of the wish image of photography which is the archive. Barbara Stafford locates the origins of this wish image in the cabinets of curiosities, or *Wunderschrank*, owned by the European elite of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These *Wunderschrank* were "exquisitely crafted universe-in-a-box, a museum testament to an omnivorous lover of things", a spectacle-enclosing box that documented and archived examples of things the European elite had encountered abroad, thus conjoining the desire for knowledge with luxury.<sup>40</sup> This desire to document and bring things closer eventually culminated in the "photo-fever" of the 1800s, with thousands of inventions and patents aspiring to immortalize the visible world.<sup>41</sup> This preservation mentality led to the development of the visual archive which was fueled by democratic political developments in 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe; developments that necessitated the establishment of a collective memory to reunderstand one's own history which had previously been suppressed by the aristocracy. The purchase of the daguerreotype process by the French government was made only after representations by M. Arago, the Director of the Paris Observatory, who stressed its potential contribution in the documentation of historic and archeological sites.<sup>42</sup> Hence the invention and dissemination of photography was always rooted in the desire to immortalize and archive the visible world. When camera technology became available for public consumption, the public embraced it as a means of documentation that legitimated bourgeois structures of familial respectability. Slater notes how the family studio portrait "monumentalises and substantialises, commemorates and reproduces an idealised moment and person outside of the flow of practical everyday life."<sup>43</sup> Like the *Wunderschrank* that preceded it, photography constituted both archivic impulse and pleasure, evidenced by the production and consumption of camera technology stretching

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<sup>40</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Devices of Wonder*, 7

<sup>41</sup> André Bazin sees photography as the historical culmination of the museumifying impulses of society and its arts. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *Classic Essays on Photography*. ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980)

<sup>42</sup> Christine M. Boyer, "La Mission Héliographique: Architectural Photography, Collective Memory and the Patrimony of France, 1851" in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*. ed.s Joan M. Schwartz, and James R. Ryan. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003)

<sup>43</sup> Don Slater, "Domestic Photography and Digital culture" in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister (London: Routledge, 1995)

from the craze for *carte de vistas* in the 1860s, stereoscopes in the early 20th century, up to the current fetish for digital imaging technologies. The blindness to mediation and the association of the photograph with the objective image originates in the wish image of photography to be the utopia of the archive.

Allan Sekula, reflecting on a published collection of historical photographs, observes how the “archival ambitions and procedures” intrinsic to photographic practice constructs “an imaginary economy” in which historical and social memory are “preserved, transformed, restricted, and obliterated” as well as elided or left unasked.<sup>44</sup> He notes the alliance of the archive with notions of ownership and property through the existence of different forms of commercial, corporate, government and private archives. The photographic archive, then, is a “territory of images” whose unity is imposed “first and foremost” by ownership and whose contents are subordinate to the “logic of exchange.”<sup>45</sup> The purchase of reproduction rights under copyright law also implies a certain semantic license, where “not only are the pictures in archives often literally for sale, but their meanings are up for grabs.”<sup>46</sup> Thus they become variously appropriated by different disciplines and discourses over time. In this liberation of meaning from its original context, Sekula notes how a collection of photographs in book form become reduced to mere visual concerns, establishing a “relation of abstract visual equivalence between pictures” which makes it hard to detect underlying relations of power.<sup>47</sup> The objective appearance of archives conceals the fact that archives are not neutral for they embody “the power inherent in accumulation, collection, and hoarding as well as that power inherent in the command of the lexicon and rules of a language.”<sup>48</sup> Noting that photography was allied from the very beginning with the establishment of global archives and repositories modeled after libraries, encyclopedias, museums and police files, Sekula argues that “any photographic archive, no matter how small, appeals indirectly to these institutions for its authority”. The basis of its truth lies in an aggressive empiricism “bent on achieving a universal inventory of appearance.” Thus archival projects typically manifest a compulsive desire for completeness, “a faith in an ultimate coherence

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<sup>44</sup> Allan Sekula, “Reading an Archive” In *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*. ed. Brian Wallis. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 115

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 116

<sup>46</sup> This semantic availability of pictures in archives exhibits the same abstract logic which characterizes goods on the marketplace where quality transmutes into quantity.

<sup>47</sup> Sekula, *Reading an Archive*, 117

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 118

imposed by the sheer quantity of acquisitions”, where knowledge of this sort can only be organized according to bureaucratic means.<sup>49</sup>

For Derrida, these structures of power embedded in an archive constitutes the “destruction drive” of the archive which works against itself by commanding “the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to ... the archive, ... the documentary ... auxiliary or memorandum.”<sup>50</sup> Hence the archive is not only the place for “stocking and for conserving content of the past which would exist in any case”, but “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Sekula argues that archival forms such as photographic books and exhibitions, by their very structure and connection between knowledge and power, “reproduce these rudimentary ordering schemes, and in so doing implicitly claim a share in both the authority and illusory neutrality of the archive.” Like the blindness to mediation in the photographic process, the apparatus of selection and interpretation at any stage of photographic (and archive) production is rendered invisible, or made to “celebrate its own workings as a kind of moral crusade or magic.”<sup>52</sup> This rendering invisible transforms the awareness of history as an interpretation into a faith of history as representation – historical writing becomes history itself.<sup>53</sup> Photographs come to be seen as sources of factual knowledge and the archive confirms the existence of a linear progression from past to present, offering “the possibility of an easy and unproblematic retrieval of the past from the transcendent position offered by the present.”<sup>54</sup> Sekula argues that the widespread use of photographs as historical illustrations suggest that only those events that can be pictured are significant; truth becomes established not by argument but by providing an ‘experience’. As history becomes spectacle, all other forms of telling and remembering begin to fade.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 10

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16-17

<sup>52</sup> Sekula, *Reading an Archive*, 119

<sup>53</sup> Or as Terry Eagleton puts it in “Capitalism and Form”, political legitimacy is “founded on fading memory and blunted sensibility, as crimes come to grow on us like old cronies.” *New Left Review* 14 (Mar/Apr 2002)

<sup>54</sup> Sekula, *Reading an Archive*, 121

Derrida locates the impulse of the archive as a “painful desire for a return to the authentic and singular origin” – an auratic gesture whose “nostalgic desire” to return to the origin is predicated on its very loss in archiving; it is only achieved at the moment in recording when the archive is yet to be detached from the primary impression of its “singular, irreproducible, and archaic origin.”<sup>55</sup> Gillian Rose critiques such views as fantasies of an all-powerful and all-encompassing archive, noting that there are fractures between the meaning the viewer constructs and the meaning the archive intends.<sup>56</sup> But it is not the uniform inscription of meaning that is the power of the archive (Sekula himself has pointed out that “archivic potentialities” change over time), rather it is this dislocation of meaning from context that enables it to appear as a representation of history rather than an interpretation of history. The archive is an abstraction that corresponds to the Heideggerian *gestell*, which is a revealing through ordering that masks all other ways of revealing.<sup>57</sup> In digital technology, the archivic impulse finds its penultimate expression. Digital archives do not deteriorate over time as physical archives do, and their records do not contain any trace that reveal their creators or their own history. The transformation from dusty yellowing sheaves into pure abstraction means the archive finally achieves the pure exchange and immortalization it desires – it no longer represents but becomes history; outlasting all alternatives and that which cannot be archived.<sup>58</sup> This digital technology, far from emancipation from inequalities, was developed by and conjoined with the logic of the market; the institution and naturalization of licensing agreements means people will try to exploit existing archives and in turn change the form of what will be archived. Consider the trends: the visual content industry is dominated by two large transnational agencies – Getty Images, and Corbis who not only supply, but control production and distribution of about 70% of still images worldwide. The acquisition of the Bettmann archive, one of the world’s largest private depositories, by Bill Gates through Corbis means 16 million historical photographs and images previously available to the public become restricted to only those who can afford the licensing rights.

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<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 91-97

<sup>56</sup> Gillian Rose, “Practicing Photography: an archive, a study, some photographs, and a researcher” *Journal of Historical Geography* 26, no. 4 (Oct 2000)

<sup>57</sup> As Derrida puts it, “what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way; the archive has never determined the moment of recording without determining the institution of archivable event - its meaning is codetermined by the structure that archives.” (*Archive Fever*, 18)

<sup>58</sup> The automation of digital archives also endow them with fetish of the (in)human substitute and illusion of objectivity that have obsessed Western invention since early automata.

But all utopias hide a fatal contradiction – the very boundaries defined by the archivic grid creates areas of non-inclusion that obstructs its aspirations towards achieving the inclusion of totality for what falls on the grid boundary cannot be referred to.<sup>59</sup> These liminal zones are both the basis and bane of its existence for they reveal the irrationality and arbitrariness of the boundaries drawn by the logic of the archivic grid whereby the eradication of the boundary also eradicates the grid.<sup>60</sup> Hence the archivic grid tries to render these liminal zones invisible by making them smaller or less perceptible in an attempt to hide its bad totality. This is why digital imaging technologies aspire towards even higher resolutions, in an attempt to render the gaps between the pixels invisible; yet this wish image was always immanent in the older analog form, evidenced by the obsession with the development of fine-grained film and processing techniques to minimize grain. The true crisis of the digital is not in fracturing the analog nor redefining analog in its terms; the crisis is in foregrounding the wish images which have been reified and hidden in the analog and revealed by its perfected form in the digital. The analog in ruin reveals its utopic moment and its continuation in the digital.

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<sup>59</sup> Derrida in *Who's Afraid of Philosophy?* points out the paradox of the archive lies not in its forgetting but in its exclusion that form the seeds of its own negation. "But something else can always happen (against its will), affecting the structure of its very space. It can, first of all, forget its own elect: we know that it sometimes loses their names in ever more inaccessible depths. This selectivity no doubt signifies, first of all, the finitude of an institutional memory. The paradox lies elsewhere ... The surface of its archive is then marked by what it keeps outside, expels, or does not tolerate. It takes the inverted shape of that which is rejected. IT lets itself be delineated by the very thing that threatens it or that it feels to be a threat. In order to (identify itself), to be what it is, to delimit itself and recognize itself in its own name, it must espouse the very lines of its adversary ... even bear its name as a negative mark." (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 5

<sup>60</sup> Rosalind Krauss describes the grid in modern art as both a repression and contradiction in its attempt "to mask and to reveal it at one and the same time" (*Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 12)



## II. The Ideology of Art

### *aura to simulacra*

In the supposed transformation of production to (re)production, from aura to simulacra, 'postmodern' writings drawing upon Lyotard and Baudrillard have portrayed the dissolution of reality into free floating signifiers, where there is no longer an objective reality but which is instead constructed out of a multiplicity of discourses.<sup>1</sup> Vilem Flusser sees the origins of such perspectives as stemming from our distrust of "alternate worlds" emerging from computers; not just in its immateriality of "hazy figments hovering in nothingness", but that it is something we have designed vs. existing a priori.<sup>2</sup> According to Flusser,

This imposes on us not only a new ontology, but also a new anthropology. We have to understand ourselves - our "self" - as such a "digital distribution," as a realization of possibilities thanks to dense distribution. We have to understand ourselves as curvatures and convexities in the field of criss-crossing, especially human, relations. We are "digital computations" of swirling point-potentialities.<sup>3</sup>

This implicit association of the 'postmodern' with the digital (and the 'modern' with the analog) leads Anna Everett to coin 'digitextuality' which "suggests a more precise of utilitarian trope capable at once of describing and constructing a sense-making function for digital technology's newer interactive protocols, aesthetic features,

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<sup>1</sup> (re)production is the production of reproductions

<sup>2</sup> Vilem Flusser, "Digital Apparition" in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 242

<sup>3</sup> Flusser, *Digital Apparition*, 244

transmedia interfaces and end-user subject positions.”<sup>4</sup> On the basis of an incorporation of hip lexicon, Everett claims that her ‘digitextuality’ therefore goes beyond (Kristeva’s) intertextuality by moving into “a metasignifying system of discursive absorption whereby different signifying systems and materials are translated and often transformed into zeros and ones for infinite recombinant signifiers.”<sup>5</sup> The conception of the digital image as ‘post-photography’ (which are largely based on specious understandings of technology and practice) is symptomatic of the association of the digital as the zeitgeist of our current age in which writers such as Bill Nichols assert that the computer is “more than an object: it is also an icon and metaphor that suggests new ways of thinking about ourselves and our environment.”<sup>6</sup> Using software as the basis of his argument, Roy Ascott argues that post-photography is interactivity and connectivity “in which the viewer can play an active part in the transformation or affirmation of the images the photographer provides.”<sup>7</sup> Thus post-photography moves beyond reproduction but a “co-production” between the photographer and viewer in the creation of meaning whose “object lies in a virtual space, and in an implicit world which evolves within the flow of hypermedia – layered, relational, and constantly shifting in content and context, depending on the behavior and consciousness of the viewer.”<sup>8</sup> This sense of emancipation through technology is shared by David Tomas who argues that the historical conditioning of Western and other cultures to view the world through photographic images is being usurped by post-photography’s critical exploration and transformation of “historical and contemporary contexts that define current modes of image production in a culture” by tracing “the networks of its cultures and operational logics through broadly conceived spatial, temporal, social and environmental contexts.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Everett “Digitextuality and Click Theory” in *New Media: Theories and Practices*, ed.s Anna Everett & John Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5-6

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>6</sup> Bill Nichols, “The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems” *Screen* 29 (May 1988). Nichols’ essay has acquired a canonical status in its appearance in several reading lists and syllabi and its title and content is symptomatic of the general desire to be the next visionary like Benjamin.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Ascott, “Photography at the Interface” in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 170

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 171

<sup>9</sup> David Tomas, “From the Photograph to Postphotographic Practice: Toward a Postoptical ecology of the eye” in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 151

Media historian Jeffrey Sconce's delicious polemic is a refreshing antidote to such 'scholarship' laden with empty jargon and platitudes.<sup>10</sup> He draws a parallel between Charles Mackay's account of "tulipomania" (where the introduction of the tulip to Western Europe in the 17th century sparked a craze for this exotic flower and created a system of speculation and exchange) and the emerging field of 'new media' studies, noting the disconnect between the "increasingly banal" applications of digital media in the "Real world" and the favored objects of study in the academy – "the seemingly endless claims that the internet, MUDS (multiuser domains), avatars, virtual reality (VR), TiVO, Palm-pilots and whatnot have led to radical redefinitions of identity, race, gender, narrativity, subjectivity, community, democracy, the body, and so on ... despite the fact that evidence of sweeping transformations in identity, reality, art, and politics remains scant."<sup>11</sup> Sconce connects the seeming desire of such scholars to be visionaries or revolutionaries manifest in their works to the pressures for funding and making connections to potential donors due to changes in the structure of academy, especially its deeper articulation into the corporate sector.<sup>12</sup>

There are of course many scholars doing excellent work in the political, financial, and cultural economies of new media, examining digital culture less as a giddy revolution than as product and extension of more entrenched social forces. But let's face it: thumbing through the course schedules of many media departments and the catalogs of major university presses, this isn't the sexy, grant-grabbing, tenure insurance that makes for a career these days. Reading the more vapory work on new media, one gets the feeling that most of its claims about the recasting of body, identity, and subjectivity are based on either popular representations of these technologies, avant-garde art incorporating these technologies, or critical theory projected onto these technologies<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Daniel Herwitz decries the (identity thinking) mentality in film studies to English departments that adulterates the "transparent relationship between art theory and art practice where there is none to be found."<sup>14</sup> The use of theory as legitimation and hype is made possible not only because avant-garde norms of "theoretical prefiguration" and

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Sconce "Tulip Theory" in *New Media: Theories and Practices*, ed.s Anna Everett & John Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-181

<sup>12</sup> Jameson has also noted the contemporary celebration of post-whatever perspectives (particularly those that connect modernity with technology and utopia) as being embedded in Capital "But there are deeper motivations, deeper advantages, and they mostly lie, if I may put it that way, in the new global market, and not least in the global market of ideas." *Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 8

<sup>13</sup> Sconce, *Tulip Theory*, 181

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993),

“instantaneous theoretical empowerment” (a la Moholy-Nagy and Mondrian) have been internalized in art and academia, but also in the incestuous collusion of academia and art that (re)produces the taste and market for such practices. As Herwitz puts it,

The philosopher-theorist and the artist-theorist converge because *both* claim to find their favored art example in the domain of avant-garde art. The avant-garde artist aims to make such a perfectly revealing work; the philosopher claims to have found it there.<sup>15</sup>

The theoretical genesis of such “vapor studies” can be traced to the concept of simulation advanced by Jean Baudrillard who conceptualizes the dissolution of reality as the substitution of the real with signs of the real i.e. the hyperreal. According to Baudrillard, representation is based on the equivalence of sign and the real while simulation is based on the “utopic principle of equivalence.”<sup>16</sup> Hence the image transforms from being a mere reflection of reality to mask reality itself, which further changes to mask an absence of reality; finally becoming pure simulacrum with no relation to reality. He asserts that Marxist concepts of ideology are not only insufficient, but misguided because capital as sorcery of social relations was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominates. For Baudrillard, ideology is only the “corruption of reality through signs” while simulation is the “short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs” which results in a hyperreal sociality where the real is confused with its model.<sup>17</sup>

To counterpose simulation against ideology, Baudrillard formulates his three orders of simulacra. The counterfeit is the dominant schema of the ‘classical period’ which corresponds to the first order simulacra, while production dominates the second order simulacra in the industrial era, and simulation is the dominant schema in our current code-governed phase (i.e. third order simulacra) where the sign no longer has an obligation to but is itself emancipated from reality.<sup>18</sup> While the first order simulacrum presupposes an evident dispute between the (Platonic) simulacrum and the real (eg. a counterfeit artwork), the second order simulacrum eliminates this by the implementation of a series of two or more identical objects where the problem of their specificity and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra” in *Simulacra and Simulation*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>18</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Order of Simulacra” in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993)

origin is no longer posed; the relation is no longer one of an original and counterfeit but one of equivalence. Third order simulacra are marked by the extinction of the original reference where the real no longer has any ties with reality but generated from “models from which all forms proceed according to modulated differences”; only affiliation to the model has any meaning. Through this reproduction via models, reality becomes volatile and replaced by hyperreality. The impact on art was that the copy of an original work, which until the 19th century was legitimate and had its own value, is now made inauthentic and illegitimate.<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard argues that this shift is not due to photographic technology disqualifying hand copies, but changes in “conditions of the signification of the oeuvre itself” (i.e. not production but signification). In the old system, the various copies were based on an original and did not constitute a “series” in the modern, industrial sense of the word where both original and copy are “equivalent in a single finality”.<sup>20</sup>

However, Baudrillard's orders of simulacra shares the same epistemic blind spot as media presence theory by presuming an ideal state and telos of sensory immersion divorced from historical and social conditions.<sup>21</sup> Academic paintings and the rich description in the novels of the 19th century were simulations of the bourgeois reality – compelling hyperrealities to the peoples of the 19th century that were reproduced from models of their society which manifested themselves in respective artistic and literary genres. Baudrillard's definition of our current age of simulation suggests we live in an entirely disembodied age with its conceit of surpassing and progressing beyond history. In doing so Baudrillard makes the fallacy of assuming the current code of realism is the ultimate ‘captive realism’. His simulacra defined solely by technological attributes rather than overdetermined by socio-historical contexts and cognitive perceptions (Benjamin, however, recognized the historicity of perception, and sees codes of realism as shifting with further development of technology and society). The ‘special effects’ and acting of early movies look trite and artificial to us today but those codes were compelling to their audiences when they were first produced. Defoe's novels were hyperreal for the 19th century audiences with their first-person narratives and constant references to the concerns of the middle class, but not to present day audiences exposed to *Jurassic*

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Gesture and Signature: Semiurgy in Contemporary Art” in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1981), 103

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, *Gesture and Signature*, 103

<sup>21</sup> In turn they fail to consider and critique why the desire towards an illusion of non-mediation of media and technology in both theory and practice is valorized as an ideal to be aspired to.

*Park*. The production of real from models of the real thus extends way back to the 19th century and beyond and not simply a feature of our 'digital' or 'cybernetic' age. The ahistoricity of Baudrillard's orders of simulacra is shown in Deleuze's re-reading of Platonic attempts to separate essence from appearance (and original from copy) via the distinction between copies and simulacra; copies being "well-founded pretenders, guaranteed by resemblance" while simulacra are "false pretenders, built upon a dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion of deviation."<sup>22</sup> Baudrillard's first-order simulacra is really the Platonic copy, and the Platonic simulacra turns out to be more radical than Baudrillardian simulacra being rooted in fundamental difference rather than mimesis with a model.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, writers claiming the digital image as 'post-photography' fail to recognize that the photograph itself was already hyperreal before the advent of digital technology. Any photographer worth their salt knows that not only does film 'see' differently than our eyes (or CCDs) do, but different films have different reciprocity characteristics which makes them respond differently to the same scene. The glorious vibrant colors of coffee-table books and *National Geographic* magazines are only possible by combining apochromatic lenses with highly saturated transparency films such as Fuji Velvia; and the poreless perfection of wedding portraits and magazine covers can only be achieved with low-contrast film such as Kodak Portra (in addition to a bevy of studio lighting effects). The features of simulation and manipulation accorded to the digital image were already extant for the past few decades in various imaging technologies used by doctors and astronomers. The first 'simulated' digital pictures were produced in the 1940s when radio telescopes were invented when astronomers use grayscale pictures reconstructed from the signals for analysis. Since then, false color has been employed to create "pretty pictures" for public consumption even if it creates (false) boundaries in continuums.<sup>24</sup> Image processing techniques have been used to 'perfect reality' since the first space images were published in magazines yet no one has problematized this half-century worth of image manipulation and simulation. Furthermore, the impulse to perfect reality

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<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy" in *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 256

<sup>23</sup> Again, this demonstrates how the structures of identity thinking corrupt and pervade even seemingly "radical" thoughts.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Lynch, & Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr., "Aesthetics and digital image processing: representational craft in contemporary astronomy" in *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations*. ed.s Gordon Fyfe, & John E. Law. (London: Routledge, 1988)

was already evident in early photography; Rosler notes that "any nineteenth-century photographer of landscapes was likely to make good exposures of cloud-bearing skies to marry to appropriate images of the terrain below (or to retouch or double-expose the negatives), simply because the orthochromatic film couldn't do justice to both at once."<sup>25</sup> Hence, we can locate the wish image of photography as not merely to capture but to reproduce 'perfect' reality, which finds its culmination in the digital image. Yet if the image has always been mutable and hyperreal, why then is simulation and the question of reality being problematized now?<sup>26</sup>

To Baudrillard's credit, he has been misrepresented every time his concepts of simulacra and hyperreal are invoked to describe the codes of media production – be it Hollywood special effects or digital photography. For instance, Robert Malina reduces Baudrillard's critique of the hyperreal into mere aesthetic sensibility by arguing that art in "post-mechanical reproduction" is not in creating a series but a "generative reproduction" where the goal is to "make copies that are as different as possible from each other, but constrained by a set of initial rules."<sup>27</sup> Such 'postmodern' writings have extirpated Baudrillard's political intent for he was not talking about aesthetic codes but how society itself becomes produced through abstract models.<sup>28</sup> When Baudrillard proclaimed that "digitality is its metaphysical principle ... and DNA its prophet", it was a critique of the empirical principle of structural origin rather than positing it as its model.<sup>29</sup> For Baudrillard, this discourse of structural origin is manifest in the constant quest to search for the "smallest indivisible element", be it "prison cells, electronic cells, party cells or microbiological cells" in the belief that one can locate a genetic, generative code that can "produce all the questions and all the possible solutions from which to select."<sup>30</sup> Thus social control by means of an end is replaced with "social control by means of prediction, simulation, programmed anticipation and indeterminate mutation, all governed, however,

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<sup>25</sup> Martha Rosler, "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations" in *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, ed.s Hubertus von Amelunxen, et. al. (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1996), 31

<sup>26</sup> I see this as stemming in part from the "tulipomania" of 'new media' described by Jeffrey Sconce, as well as the separation of theory, technique and practice. A further exploration of this question is in the concluding section "Real-ly Real-ly"

<sup>27</sup> Robert F. Malina "Digital Image - Digital Cinema: The Work of Art in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction" in *Digital Image-- Digital Cinema : Siggraph '90 Art Show Catalog*. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990), 37

<sup>28</sup> Ironically, Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal is itself reduced to a hyperreal as writers appropriate it for various purposes.

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, *Order of Simulacra*, 57

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

by the code."<sup>31</sup> In the process, the object under investigation dies under through this abstraction, and thus "takes its revenge for being 'discovered' and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it."<sup>32</sup> (Additionally, Baudrillard's conception of the hyperreal provides a useful heuristic that I radicalize instead as the hyperreal replacing the (Lacanian) Real.<sup>33</sup>)

But by heralding the end of Marxist production and ideology in the demise of the 'real', Baudrillard's conception of simulacra conceals how simulation technologies are harnessed by capital for sensory distraction from reality (eg. computer games and movies), and to distance and partition reality (e.g. flight and war simulators). Similarly, 'postmodern' writings that construct the digital as a revolution because it is emancipated from the material elide how the digital is increasingly enmeshed in Capital. To move from 'traditional' to digital photography, one has to acquire the whole enchilada of high performance battery packs, memory cards, special inks and papers etc. The reliance on computer chips and software impose mediating "black boxes"; one can no longer build a camera if one wants to, the entire process of production is not only taken out of our hands but aestheticized and mythified and unknown.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the digital sign is never fully emancipated from material reality; it has to materialize and exist in a material physical storage medium, be it in a memory chip or a hard drive, and it needs physical access points such as computer screens and keyboards. This desire and discourse of immateriality is evidenced by the elision of the material in representations of technology in mass media – where once the utopia of technology was marked by its ostentatious, other-worldly nature of exposed metal and buttons; the utopia of technology as it is now represented tends toward the immaterial or invisible where controls and screens are projected onto air. David Rodowick described a recent AT&T advertisement as an "exercise in fiction" in its presentation of products in embryo form, with those in development, and those one will "undoubtedly not see for many years."<sup>35</sup> He observes how such representations do not just sell existing products and services but "inspire the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 60

<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard, *Precession of Simulacra*, 6

<sup>33</sup> Under Lacan's registers of reality, the Real is that which cannot be symbolized (such as the UnExpressed) yet this is being replaced by the hyperreality of archives (and statistics) which are an illusion of (complete) cataloguing and indexing experience (i.e. false totalities).

<sup>34</sup> Recall Anthony Wilden's argument that the digital is outside the relationship between sender and receiver and mediates it

<sup>35</sup> David N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 205



desire for a different world ... a utopian world based on technological innovation that will be brought into existence not by individuals working for social change and equality but by the invention and marketing of capitalist 'third-wave' companies. It is a seductive vision meant to convince us that capitalism, for centuries the source of so many of the world's social problems and inequities, can still be the solution."<sup>36</sup> Such 'progressive' digital narratives draw heavily upon (regressive) 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism – by pitting heroic technology against society (content) with a narrative telos that inevitably linear and utopic (form). By doing so, these mythic narratives invest technology with powers of unity or multiplicity that are contrasted against the existing social order.<sup>37</sup> The valorization of "boutique" and "visionary" practices by academics not only plays into the hands of manufacturers who stoke "niche-market fantasies of autonomy and individuation", but also fuels a "frantic economy of public paradigmism and troping" that makes bedfellows of technological promise, academic trope, and industrial incentive.<sup>38</sup> Digital theorists should heed John Caldwell's dictum that,

Theorizing digital culture, then, does not mean simply examining how theorists have articulated and described cultural effects. It also means paying attention to how theorization itself is a culturally generated practice, produced and circulated in and by specific professional communities.<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, Baudrillard's assertion that the real is replaced by the signs of the real implicitly assumes there was an actual reality that was accessible and known in the first place.<sup>40</sup> Iterating Flusser, who argues that our distrust of reality stems from it being constructed by us rather than existing a priori – the postmodern gesture to being Post Cartesian is really based on a Most Cartesian faith in objective reality. This Cartesian basis thus constitutes the utopian element of postmodern thought, despite its outward nihilism. The discursive transcendence of the material in postmodern thought is allied with the link between the discourse of perfection and technology where the "stain of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Coyne, *Technoromanticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999)

<sup>38</sup> John Caldwell, "Theorizing the Digital Landrush" in *Electronic Media and Technoculture* ed. John Caldwell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). For example the trope of "push" technology promises agency and choice but is in fact exploited for targeted marketing.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>40</sup> Similarly, digital art's claims to fracture reality validates that very reality they seek to destroy by presuming it to be (unproblematic) eternal nature instead of questioning its epistemic bases by examining its internal contradictions and historical nature. This is the power of paradigms; mere opposition and resistance merely reinforces it

humanity from production" is removed.<sup>41</sup> Both stem from the same project of Enlightenment and share the same belief in their intrinsic progress.

### ***the auratic gesture***

Like Baudrillard's simulacra, Benjamin's aura has been extirpated by its dissociation from its original contexts. Benjamin's concept of the aura is often misunderstood as mystique, and the associated concepts of cult value and exhibition value get bandied about with little comprehension of their political significance and intent.<sup>42</sup> To rescue Benjamin's aura from its ignominious fate as a mere footnote to Baudrillardian simulacra, one must first understand that the "work of art" essay is deliberately antithetical to the thesis form which is a monad of linear progress – it comprises of fifteen sections written in a constellation, where sections are neither wholly contained nor wholly dependent. Instead theoretical and allegorical sections engage in dialogue with one another and with other debates of its time – some of the most obvious addresses being Lukacs, Heidegger, and Brecht.<sup>43</sup>

In the essay, Benjamin sets forth fifteen theses that examine the superstructural changes in art under the then current conditions of production which were intended to brush aside outmoded bourgeois concepts "such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery", the "uncontrolled" application of which results in fascist practice. Against the bourgeois autonomy of the unique artwork, Benjamin notes that "in principle a work of art has always been reproducible"; what is new about mechanical reproduction in the current age is not reproduction itself but its "accelerated intensity" (section I). By tracing the history of reproduction in art, Benjamin locates the wish image of reproducibility from the Greek bronzes, to printing, to engraving, and to lithography. Yet under the old

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<sup>41</sup> Gary McCarron, "Pixel Perfect: Towards a Political Economy of Digital Fidelity" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1999)

<sup>42</sup> Michelle Henning ("Digital encounters") notes how the concept of the aura in the essay is frequently linked to originality, authorship, uniqueness etc. By connecting the concept of the aura to its other appearance in Benjamin's essay "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", she links aura instead to memory or historical consciousness.

<sup>43</sup> The linear referential logic of the thesis form cannot comprehend the rich allusions of the allegorical form, whereby its most direct references are unexpressed. Hence the supposed ambivalence of Benjamin and Marx is due to the failure of identity thinking to grasp non-linear/binary thought. Both were against the new/current as well as the old/past systems for being corrupt; but instead of dismissing the old merely because it was the past (in the manner of telos), they locate elements worth redeeming that have been denigrated/decimated by 'progress' and the new/current.

schema of reproduction, the reproduced artwork had its own artistic value and “captured a place of its own among the artistic processes.”<sup>44</sup> Authenticity, for Benjamin, is not the mark of the author-creator but the life of art work, the “essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”(section II)<sup>45</sup> Mechanical reproduction despite its potential to facilitate “halfway” access to the original transmutes quality into quantity (section V); such that landscape now “passes in review before the spectator in the movie” instead of being a site of contemplation, and thus always constitutes a loss – hence “one might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’”. The first appearance of aura in the essay in quotation marks highlights its use as a technical term with a specific meaning rather than its common definition. Therefore when Benjamin proceeds further to say “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art”, he was not referring to the mystique of art but its historicity (i.e. “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”). The decline of the aura then, is not just a diagnostic for the social bases of the artwork but an allegory for the larger forces of production and historical consciousness.<sup>46</sup> Benjamin refers to the urge of the masses to bring things closer “by way of its likeness”; thus extracting a “universal equality of things” even from unique objects (section III).<sup>47</sup> The world begins to be perceived as identities in this transmutation, and this is “noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics” where reality is adjusted for the masses and vice versa.<sup>48</sup> The original use value of art lay in its ritual function or cult value, “recognizable as

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<sup>44</sup> This is developed further in William Ivins' *Prints and Visual Communication*, where he traces how the historical appreciation of lithographs and engravings as works of art in their own right (skilled engravers often chose difficult artworks to reproduce to demonstrate their craft) was eroded by the confluence of photography, halftone reproduction, and the construction of the genius-author which locates the source of value on the unique art object. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969)

<sup>45</sup> This argument appears earlier in Benjamin's essay “The Task of the Translator” as well as *Origin of German Tragic Drama* where his argument on the separation of the life of work and the life of author contravenes art history and criticism's tendencies to read one off the other.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin's essay can be read as the transposition of Lukacs' “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” onto the artwork.

<sup>47</sup> There is a rich tradition of the relation between semblance/identity and historical consciousness in Marxist thought, Lukacs being a prime exponent. One can locate the origins in Marx's analogy of ideology as the inverted image in a camera obscura; a specular image that appears identical to the real. Adorno describes this problematic in relation to art as, “Art is bewitched in that the ruling criterion for its being-for-other is semblance - the exchange relation that has been established as the measure of all things.” *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 310

<sup>48</sup> This argument is based on Marx's Theory of Value and the alliance of statistics with abstraction is later developed by Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal.

secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty” (i.e. bourgeois aesthetics and practice); the emancipation of the unique artwork by mechanical reproduction created a crisis for this ritual function which was predicated on select access, thus art developed the notion of “pure art” (or *l’art pour l’art*) which bracketed art as above vulgar material concerns of the socio-economic and political spheres (section IV).

Benjamin locates in the work of art, **both** cult value and exhibition value; the former predicated on the existence of the artwork, the latter on its presentation (section V). Hence when exhibition value displaces cult value in the mechanical reproducibility of photography, the cult value of the work retires into the “ultimate retrenchment” of the human face (section VI).<sup>49</sup> Thus appearance becomes sufficient grounds for existence (i.e. becomes evidence) when the cult value shifts from the object itself to what is being represented (i.e. the mediation becomes invisible).<sup>50</sup> The revolutionary nature of photography and film was in separating art from its basis in cult value, which fractures the semblance of art’s autonomy (section VII).<sup>51</sup> However this revolutionary nature was contingent on its form – Hollywood-style acting and editing which stitches together unrelated segments to appear as an unalienated, integral whole creates a bad totality in itself and “not the approach to which cult values may be exposed”, especially when it is mired in capital interests of the film industry (sections VIII, IX, X).<sup>52</sup> Like Brecht, Benjamin attributes the revolutionary nature of form in raising consciousness, not in the lack of artifice (because that itself is artifice) but in the immanent critique of sheer artifice. Film hides all evidence of the extraneous accessories in its production, while Brechtian theatre highlights the very equipment to reveal the production of illusion and critique the “equipment-free” artifice of bourgeois aesthetics (section XI). Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of masses towards art, but this has to be paired

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<sup>49</sup> The most influential impact photography had in society was in portraiture which was previously only accessible to the wealthy. Benjamin here refers to fetish of bourgeois society for portrait photographs, beginning with the *carte d’vista* prior to the widespread availability of cameras and film.

<sup>50</sup> Again the problems of semblance and its relationship to identity thinking which Marx saw as the necessary condition of the commodity structure.

<sup>51</sup> This is later famously developed in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where the revolutionary nature of art lay not in its practices nor content, but as an allegory of society whose own contradictions reveal the contradictions in society. The concept of contradiction in Marxist dialectics constitutes both a critique and a method; whereas rationality attempts to harmonize contradictions, Marxist dialectics recognizes the oppressive nature of those harmonized contradictions, but turns those contradictions against itself (i.e. immanent critique)

<sup>52</sup> Herbert Marcuse would later develop this as repressive desublimation.

with a socially significant art form or else the conventional becomes “uncritically enjoyed” and the revolutionary “criticized with aversion”(section XII). For Benjamin, the revolutionary potential of film lay not in constructing a semblance of reality, but in fracturing that semblance through the fragmentation of time and space through techniques such as extreme close-ups, and freeze frames akin to Dadaist montage (sections XIII, XIV). The logic of distraction, thus, is seen as the antidote to the contemplative nature of bourgeois aesthetics by calling its bluff. Hence film fractures the cult value of art by its form of distraction.

The social significance of the decline of the aura resides in changes in art’s function from ritual to politics when its cult value withers away (section IV). Fascism, by aestheticizing politics, harmonizes the contradictions between the masses and the property structure, not unlike the bourgeois consummation of *l’art pour l’art* – hence in order to resist, one has to politicize aesthetics.<sup>53</sup> The decline of the aura, then, is a diagnostic of the artwork which in turn is an allegory for the larger social structure – the shattering of an oppressive tradition could either lead to a more emancipatory consciousness or an equally repressive one. An auratic experience is one which “deals with historical discontinuity with an illusion of continuity”<sup>54</sup>; thus the aura is both the sensation of and dialectic of historical consciousness. Against Heidegger’s *The Origin of the Work of Art* which locates true poiesis only in great (i.e. canonized) works of art, Benjamin’s essay critiques the sheltering of tradition as based on cult values and argues instead the potential for true poiesis in popular revolutionary forms.

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Unlike other theorists who conceive of ideology as fundamentally degraded, Jameson, drawing upon Ernst Bloch’s concept of the utopian function, notes the utopian or transcendent impulse of ideology.<sup>55</sup> He argues that one cannot fully do justice to the ideological function of even the most “degraded” forms of mass culture unless one is willing to concede the presence of something more positive within them – utopic gestures which are acts of compensation that produce an “utopian realm of the

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<sup>53</sup> If one understands what Benjamin was demonstrating via the aura, the final lines in the essay reveals the impetus behind the attempts at political and aesthetic reform between the two World Wars; Schoenberg with music, Brecht with theatre, and Eisenstein with film.

<sup>54</sup> Michelle Henning. “Digital Encounters: Mythical pasts and electronic presence”, in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister. (London: Routledge, 1995), 232

<sup>55</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”. *Social Text* 1 (Fall 1979)

senses.”<sup>56</sup> For Bloch, the utopian function is more than mere hope or the not-yet-conscious (anticipation). Instead the anticipatory or not-yet-conscious has to become conscious of its own nature as “restraint and revelation” to reach the point “where hope, in particular, the true effect of expectation in the dream forward, not only occurs as an emotion that merely exists by itself, but is conscious”; this utopian function is not merely fantasy for it possesses an “expectable not-yet-existence.”<sup>57</sup> He contrasts the abstract utopianizing of the bourgeois with its “narrow-minded empiricism”, which has no reference to a real potentiality, with the concrete utopia of Marxism that the former opposes for anticipating more desirable conditions. This utopian function (towards a concrete utopia) is “a transcending one without transcendence” where the process is both its position and corollary. This “frontline” consciousness is a countermove against the abstract utopias (or bad existence) of the bourgeois by mobilizing the contradictions inherent in the bad existence in order to overcome it to bring it to the point of collapse. Yet Bloch acknowledges that there is a genuine utopian anticipatory element in those bad existences where “the status quo is covered by the glitter of a deceptive harmonization, or, at best, a premature one, and it is surrounded by a lot of smoke or incense of false consciousness.”<sup>58</sup> False consciousness alone cannot reproduce the system for it will not be capable of prematurely harmonizing social contradictions; thus without the utopian element “class ideologies would have only managed to achieve an ephemeral delusion and not the models of art, science, and philosophy.”<sup>59</sup>

Hence the “selfish” economics posited by Adam Smith was “a situation in which altruistic excuses and arguments (also) had to be made in order to make so-called honest profits in an honorable, seemingly humane way”; it had to be harmonized by this utopian element to make it seem subjectively honest. Bloch notes how this was achieved by constructing the ethos of the “good conscience of the respectable merchant and entrepreneur who, in fact, believed in honest gains” where his role in the supply and demand was as the kind benefactor of consumers; of course, he was only considering solvent consumers whom he can make money out of by selling products extracted from the surplus value of labor; but his good conscience was kept intact for keeping the

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<sup>56</sup> Frederic Jameson. “Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”. *New Left Review* 146( Jul/Aug 1984)

<sup>57</sup> Ernst Bloch, “Art and Utopia” in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 105

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 118

customer satisfied (or a “win-win situation” in contemporary business parlance). By relating capitalist interest to the interests of the consumer, in a system where everyone operated to their mutual advantage, the capitalist economy thus “appeared as the only natural economy that one had finally discovered”.<sup>60</sup>

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The auratic gesture, thus recognizes the persistence of the aura, or at least its notion, as well as its implicit utopic impulse.<sup>61</sup> Simply put, the auratic gesture is an utopic gesture towards the aura. It is not concerned with authenticity per se, but attempts through a series of discursive practices, to establish the subject/object in a unique space-time confluence, inserting it into a partial, select history so that it seems to be an organic progression from an unified past.<sup>62</sup> It is itself a simulacrum because the reality and authenticity it gestures to is imaginary and generated by discursive tropes. Or as Baudrillard puts it, “The modern sign dreams of its predecessor, and would dearly love to rediscover an obligation in its reference to the real.”<sup>63</sup> The auratic gesture is immanent in the reproduced object and manifest in various forms such as its advertising and packaging through which the reproduced subject/object tries to become unique.<sup>64</sup> The contradictions of capital are epitomized by the bizarre practice of selling ‘future’ heirlooms through shopping channels on television. Through a series of auratic gestures, these faux antiques mask the oxymoron of a reproduced heirloom. These gesture towards the object’s “classic” design (with its codes of history and longevity as opposed to capital’s transitoriness); its status as a work of art as evidenced by the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 112

<sup>61</sup> The use of utopic vs utopian is after the manner of Brecht’s *gestus* – i.e. highlights not only the utopian nature of its aspirations, but how it is also embedded in its very form. One can consider installation art as reacting against and attempting to recover the aura of art in the age of reproduction. Yet the movement is problematic as there is an unresolved tension in the imposition of aura (unique, irreproducible, site-specific art installations) temporarily onto a liminal space (e.g. galleries, outdoor sites).

<sup>62</sup> Bourgeois fetish of “high” history manifests itself in the antiques, *objet d’Art*, and other things of breeding they surround themselves. This taste extends to bourgeois epistemology such that academic notions of validity and objectivity are based on auratic gestures. Through discursive practices such as literature reviews in theses, we situate ourselves in a select and partial history of thought; thus portraying our own ideas as organic as well as inherently progressive.

<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *Order of Simulacra*, 51

<sup>64</sup> Commercials where they advise the consumer to be aware of fakes and imitations are making an auratic gesture towards the authenticity of their product (even though authenticity does not make sense in a mass (re)produced good); that theirs is a unique product stemming from a revolutionary technology (with its implicit code of historical progress) that guarantees an utopia of whiter whites, drier armpits, and swishable hair.

detailed craftsmanship (even if it is paradoxical for a poured resin reproduction); the history of the object via the intents and biography of its creator; and that it is handmade and hence no two pieces are exactly alike so what you purchase will be really unique. All these auratic gestures play to what I call the trinity of connoisseurship – craft, uniqueness, and intentionality; or CUI for short (rhymes with “twee”). The auratic gesture, being a code for authenticity, thus articulates the subject/object into the different spheres and discursive structures by establishing similar histories and realities through hypercontext. In the process, the subject/object undergoes a transformation that transcends its limited nature. Hence stores like the Body Shop do not merely sell bath products, but purportedly offer a means of returning to traditional healing, to an organic authentic self, through the purchase of tea tree oil and other materials have been recognized and used by traditional healers for centuries. This becomes another means of commodity fetishism as the gestures toward an imaginary reality of authenticity disguises the social relations that has gone into the object’s production as well as establishing a ‘mystique’ or ‘cult value’ by imposing a distance between the subject and the object. The auratic gesture, thus masks the contradictions of capital by articulating the mass reproduced object into an imaginary unique existence onto the various histories of fashion and technology, and making it appear organic to them as well as a natural progression from them – it is the utopia of an a priori structural origin.

The relationship between the auratic gesture and the fields of art and academia is not simply in its reproduction of the commodity form, but the engendering of a historical consciousness through notions such as authorship. In “What is an Author”, Foucault associates writing with the disappearance of the writing subject through a set of “contrivances” that the subject sets up between himself and what he writes which “cancels out the signs of his particular individuality.”<sup>65</sup>

It is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier ... In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.<sup>66</sup>

In a way, photography exemplifies this construction of an objective viewpoint in the elision of the subjective by situating the absence of the taking subject/object i.e. the one

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<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), 206-207

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



who photographs is never present in the photograph.<sup>67</sup> For Foucault, notions of authorship (what he calls "author function") are not only a form of ownership but also an epistemic attribution to an author which is not a spontaneous attribution but a series of specific and complex operations whereby the projection of the author's personal biography provides the basis of explaining the work. Hence the device of an author is an instance of (teleological) historical constructions being employed to unify contradictions.

The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing – all differences have to be resolved, at least in part, by the principle of evolution, maturation, or influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be – at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconsciousness – a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction.<sup>68</sup>

Even the most 'progressive' art is not free from auratic gestures. Renato Poggioli has noted the continuity of (the ideology of) romanticism in avant-garde art despite its practitioners' claims to transcend it. This manifests itself in the avant-garde sensibility of a precursor, which "involves a retrospective historical awareness which identifies men and ideas of a more or less remote past as seeming to have anticipated some philosophical or religious, ethical or political, cultural or artistic revelation belonging to the present or to the less remote past", whereby avant-garde artists seek to justify themselves by authority or arbitration of history through tracing their "own patent of nobility in the chronicles of the past" and "a family tree of more or less authentic ancestors, more or less distant precursors."<sup>69</sup> Poggioli argues that such regression is not only fallacious because it is pretentious and arbitrary by failing to admit that everyone else also had precursors, but it also constructs avant-garde practices as the historical culmination of time or history by inscribing a "sense or consciousness of belonging to an intermediate stage, to a present already distinct from the past and to a future in potentiality which will be valid only when the future is actuality."<sup>70</sup> Christiane Paul has also noted that the impetus and perspectives of 'new media' artists did not originate in

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<sup>67</sup> A banal counterargument will point to self-portraits through the use of self-timers and cable releases. I am referring to the system of photographic production of which the photographer is only a part; there has yet to be a self-portrait that captures not only the photographer, but also the devices that enable it. This is an instance of the invisibility of mediation.

<sup>68</sup> Foucault, *What is an Author*, 215

<sup>69</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 70

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 72

the 90s but were just continuations of Dadaist and conceptual art trends (particularly the influences of Duchamp, Moholy-Nagy and Cage) using the new tools. Even though computers were used in the creation of art as early as the 60s, they were not considered 'art' as they were largely created in research laboratories; the moniker of 'new media' art only emerged in the 90s when museums and art galleries began to increasingly incorporate those forms and legitimating them as art.<sup>71</sup>

Through an articulation and insertion into a select history, the auratic gesture commits the classic ideological practice of mistaking the *partial* for the whole and generating a false, teleological, organic history that Adorno and Benjamin decried<sup>72</sup>. Yet auratic gestures are never fixed but are contested; one can see these struggles in the attempts of early photography to establish itself as an art form, and in the current struggles of digital art for legitimacy. For Baudrillard, this is reflected in the transference of value in art from an "eminent objective beauty" to the "singularity of the artist in his gesture", when meaning passes from the "restitution of appearances to the act of inventing them"; the artwork itself transforms both into a relic of artist and art history which results in the contemporary "insistent mythological demand for authenticity."<sup>73</sup> Yet the failure to recognize the historical nature of this shift, as well as its false historicity, causes art to become serial production where the artist is condemned to copy himself in his 'progressive', 'trademark' style. Hence "modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed ... art no longer contests anything, if it ever did."<sup>74</sup>

### ***the ideal/idyll of art***

Baudrillard had noted how the signature of an artist had taken on the sign value of authenticity in the art market.<sup>75</sup> While the signature is an auratic gesture employed by painters and sculptors working in the conventional media, digital art in order to be seen

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<sup>71</sup> Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003)

<sup>72</sup> The auratic gesture is immanent in Benjamin's work on the Paris Arcades – his observation that the new products of Capital reconstitute the past in their make up (fossil); and the freeing of this impulse in the dialectical image at the point of ruin is essentially an attempt to identify how these objects have inserted themselves into a history so that they seem not only organic to it but also immanently progressive.

<sup>73</sup> Baudrillard, *Gesture and Signature*, 104

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 110

<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard, *Gesture and Signature*

as credible and as a work of art, has had to generate another set of discursive practices that articulate the work into notions of CUI which have been in opposition with technology (the current debates on whether digital photography is art is reminiscent of earlier debates on whether photography is art). Tom Kemp, a U.K. based artist working with digital media, made the news on November 2000 when he premiered his painting *Analysis* that was executed from a palm-sized PDA.<sup>76</sup> He describes the process of creating on a PDA in his artist statement,

These were all 'painted' using a Palm handheld computer with TealPaint software. The Palm has a 6cm square screen with a low resolution which means all these paintings are composed of quite large pixels. Writing on the glass of the screen with a small stylus, means much less friction between the tool and the surface. This was the most difficult problem to overcome: sensitizing the fingers to cope with the loss of such a useful, reactive force.<sup>77</sup>

The act of pushing a stylus across a screen is no longer an everyday act but one fraught with difficulties and problems that the artist must overcome. The movement must now be imbued with intentionality and the strokes reflect the very craft that requires a process of "sensitizing the fingers". By calling *Analysis* the "first serious contemporary artwork produced entirely on a handheld computer", Kemp simultaneously traces the continuity of his work from the history of contemporary art, as well as a transcendence of that history on the basis of its novel use of the Palm.

*Analysis* is the first serious contemporary artwork produced entirely on a handheld computer; it is 4 feet high and 16 feet wide. Each of the small paintings is the size of the Palm's screen, about two and a half inches square. They are all different but share a common theme of trying to capture writing as a physical, human movement. The Palm painting is a record of one thousand such attempts. Each of the small paintings was made with the familiar movements of everyday writing. However, none of them contain any known characters or letters.<sup>78</sup>

Connoisseurship is invoked by gesturing to the uniqueness of the work as "a record of one thousand attempts" and capturing writing as human movement without "any known characters or letters". Kemp attempts again to insert *Analysis* into a larger historical narrative by suggesting he was influenced by the ancient Greek practice of boustrophedon in his arrangement of the small paintings.

The paintings are arranged in a grid but they are placed in the order in which they were made. The ancient Greeks had a way of writing called

<sup>76</sup> see Tom Kemp's website at <http://www.twicepublishing.com/>

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

*boustrophedon* which means the way an ox ploughs a field: up and down. They would write from left to right and then reverse the letters on the next line, writing from right to left. This helps to avoid losing one's place. The small paintings are laid out like this with sixty three across and sixteen down with a gap of eight at the end. The digital quality of the painting is quite apparent. The Palm screen has a low resolution. Because each small painting is printed at actual size the individual pixels are clearly seen. These contrasts with the obvious swiftness and complexity of the movements used when wielding the tiny electronic brushes. The graininess of the pixels can't hide the humanity of the original movements.<sup>79</sup>

Like many digital artists, Tom Kemp transforms the digital aspect, or the "graininess", of the artwork into an auratic gesture; the technology cannot hide the "humanity of the original movements", hence the digital paintings are no longer reproduced scrawls from a PDA screen but a triumph of the artist over technology – a classic CUI narrative. Materialization is the ultimate auratic gesture as it transforms infinitely reproducible digital image into a 'unique' work of art that has only a single spatial/temporal existence. The digital becomes reified into material forms, preferably something durable such as archival inks and papers.<sup>80</sup> Tom Kemp expresses this logic eloquently: "Only one print of each image is ever created. Therefore, these are all unique works."<sup>81</sup> The auratic gesture thus immortalizes the subject/object to hide the transitory nature of Capital in its logic of progression. This immortalization is not located just in thought but manifests itself in products and discourses from beauty to weather-proofing where everything hinges upon preserving the visage of an ideal and hiding the signs of history; demonstrating the transcendent power of man and his technology over nature. Is

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> The cult of personality, or the mystique of the artist, in turn stems from reified auratic gestures. The constant gesturing towards the artist's craft and uniqueness, establishes not just the artist's work but also the artist into a unique spatial and temporal confluence in history; thus establishing a distance and separation between the artist and audience and other artists. The constant references to the artist's biography establish the artist's lineage from artists past, and consequently the attributes of the art object become fetishized into signs of this uniqueness – Picasso's use of yellow, Ibsen's use of voice, Callas' passionate acting. The final reification occurs when the artist's name becomes a sign for art and another reference for a future artist to situate themselves against, i.e. one becomes canonized. Chilhuly no longer makes any of his glass pieces, but hires a workshop of glass blowers to produce them in his style. His involvement is to act as a bricoleur, assembling smaller pieces into larger pieces. Yet the public does not question the authenticity of those works because Chilhuly's name has become synonymous with glass and with art. Thus in the final reification, the artist CUI triumphs over (re)production.

<sup>81</sup> The dialectical tension of the digital with the material is also evident in the field of 3D computer graphics. These images are so hyperreal in their perfection that ironically what is considered the most advanced images from the genre are those that artificially degrade the perfections of the rendered surfaces and reality by adding digital fog, dust, grime and calculated imperfections to make them appear more realistic.

it any wonder that the archivic impulse and Capital are intimately related? For even though color photography and digital photography were invented and available much earlier than official/market accounts, both only achieved widespread success and consumer penetration when they became archival – when a process was found that could stabilize the dyes in the negative, and the development of non-fading pigment inks.<sup>82</sup> The impulse to archive hides the transience of Capital.

Yet the strategy of artificially limiting production (known as editioning) is not new for it has existed since photography attempted to legitimize itself as a valid art form. The first commercially viable form of photography, the daguerreotype, rendered positive images onto a metal plate and thus produced unique and singular objects of art. The form of photography that led to the decay of the (Benjaminian) aura was Fox Talbot's negative process that enabled the reproduction of several positives from a single negative. This was problematic as photography was "a message without code" as Barthes put it (referring to the absence of codes of representation and abstraction in its impartial rendition of visible reality).<sup>83</sup> A tourist could produce a snapshot that would be virtually indistinguishable from a fine art photograph if his camera was positioned at the same place, at about the same time, and under the same conditions. This ease of replication of reality not only contravened then extant notions of the artwork and authorship but also made photography the surveillance technology of choice and reinforced the empiricist view of reality. The aura of the photographic object was not only threatened by the reproducibility of the print but by the reproducibility of the view. Through artificially limiting the production of the photographic object, the unique spatial and temporal confluence of the object is assured or circumscribed in a fixed number of copies. Thus editioning is an auratic gesture that makes the photographic object collectible like paintings (which legitimated itself via changes in the copyright law to construct the photographer as more than a mere technician). The auratic gesture of editioning also operated by discursively embedding the photographer in his work. Early editions known as "vintage prints" cost more than later editions in the auction and resale market. This is predicated on the assumption that early editions carry the most genuine

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<sup>82</sup> This is why the scanner took off in the early 90s even though the digital camera had existed in late 80s. The eventual success of the digital camera was due in part to the development of quality inkjet prints, and the advent of the commercial Internet which created new needs and desires (such as emailing pictures to friends).

<sup>83</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977)

imprint and intent of the photographer, even though photographers generally acknowledge that later editions are closer to their original intentions.<sup>84</sup> Yet editioning constitutes a contradiction – photographers gesture towards the unique object yet their practice is based precisely on those reproductions for it is the copy that has value (which is why darkroom aids were developed and utilized to ensure the best reproduction of the ‘perfect’ print or negative, which finds its culmination in the ‘exact’ reproduction of digital technology). By disavowing reproduction, they conceal the reproductive nature of their work from others and themselves.

But it requires more than simply limiting production to establish the legitimacy of photography as art. Early photographers developed a style known as Pictorialism which attempted to simulate the look of paintings through soft focus lenses and elaborate staging of scenes. The pictorialist aesthetic was an auratic gesture to invoke parallels between the photographic object and painting which fell into disfavour as a new ‘realist’ aesthetic emerged with the improvement in optics and portability of cameras (and the advocacy of the f/64 group led by photographers such as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams). This aesthetic (still dominant today) is one of tack sharp images and portrays reality “as it is”. The pictorialist auratic gesture was jettisoned in favor those that established the photographer as an artist in his own right, notably the discourse of the photographer not only being the master of technology but surpassing it.

Hence biography and artist statements became paramount – Henri Cartier Besson captured “decisive moments”, Alfred Stieglitz captured “equivalents”. Photographers talk about knowing and feeling the moment and place which enables them to transcend the impersonal nature of technology through a mastery of their craft. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of Ansel Adams whose development of the Zone System transformed photography into a craft of technology whose mysteries have to be painstakingly mastered. His description of the genesis of his most famous image, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* is the epitome of these discursive practices.

I came across this extraordinary scene when returning to Santa Fe from an excursion to the Chama Valley. The sun was edging a fast-moving bank of clouds in the west. I set up the 8x10 camera as fast as I could

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<sup>84</sup> These CUI notions are so ingrained that the art market snubs special editions of Ansel Adams prints. When Adams inherited a studio gallery in Yosemite Valley, he hired people to produce special editions of his prints for sale in the gallery from his negatives. While these special editions are virtually indistinguishable from Ansel Adams’ own prints, the fact that Adams was not involved in the printing process decreased the ‘aura’ of the copies and thus have no value on the market.

while visualizing the image. I had to exchange the front and back elements of my Cooke lens, attaching the 23-inch element in front, with a glass G filter (#15) behind the shutter. I focused and composed the image rapidly at full aperture, but I knew that because of the focus-shift of the single lens component, I had to advance the focus about 3/32 inch when I used f/32. These mechanical processes and the visualization were intuitively accomplished. Then, to my dismay, I could not find my exposure meter!"<sup>85</sup>

The act of photography becomes a dramatic narrative that demonstrates the 'aura' of the image by the unique spatial/temporal confluence of the photographer and the "extraordinary scene". Yet it is not sufficient to be at the right place at the right time; to be an artist, one has to have an artistic intent that is "visualized" and brought to fruition through one's craft demonstrated through one's mastery of technology, knowing "intuitively" what is the aperture setting appropriate, which lenses to use, and what filters to render one's vision onto the emulsion. The entire process of photography from recording, to developing, to printing has to be intentional and controlled - through the Zone System, the photographer found his craft.<sup>86</sup>

But the practices of the artist biography and art history are not only historical but also constructs their own history.<sup>87</sup> Catherine Soussloff locates their impulses in Kantian aesthetics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century whose valorization of creative activity and exclusive focus on the object constructs genius as locked into the object. That connection between artist and work has become mythic in our culture such that all written accounts, be they biographies or art history come to be seen as expressions of artists' intentions. The result is that art, artist and texts become naturalized and not critically examined.<sup>88</sup> One such instance is the construction of Beethoven as a difficult genius, despite the recognition of Beethoven (who was one of the pioneers of the concept and role of the autonomous artist) by his contemporaries was neither spontaneous nor uncontested. While his music was perceived by both opponents and advocates as different from other compositions that conformed to Viennese convention, his lionization by the aristocratic circles was due to the diffusion of patronage to other ranks of Viennese society.

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<sup>85</sup> Ansel Adams, *The Negative*. {Seventh printing} (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1999), 127

<sup>86</sup> The Zone System epitomizes photography's fetish with technology and reproducibility in its employment of densitometers and exhaustively testing the exposure and development characteristics of film and papers.

<sup>87</sup> See Ekbert Faas *Genealogy of Aesthetics*, for a discussion of the shifts in aesthetic sensibilities through the history of philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

<sup>88</sup> Catherine M. Soussloff. *The Absolute Artist: the historiography of a concept*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

Beethoven was able to innovate socially to redefine the composer-patron relationship by cultivating the personality of the "difficult genius" to claim the alternative route to success opened up by the democratization of patronage. Where previously the aristocracy were cultural leaders by their monopoly over patronage, the entrance of the public and nouveau riche into the cultural sphere meant they had to maintain their leadership through qualitative rather than quantitative means. Hence they had to cultivate 'innovative' art to appear to be on the 'cutting edge' of cultural production.<sup>89</sup> One finds the same tendencies in 'difficult', 'modern' art today (and intellectual thought as well).<sup>90</sup>

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural strategy of the bourgeoisie was to cultivate Art as an autonomous and contemplative sphere – its social function predicated upon its removal from the contexts of practical life, serving as a sign for those who engaged in it that they were not under the pressures of survival. Therefore art reproductions, exhibitions, museums, and other institutions were actually technologies of power that "metamorphosed the spectator's participation and marginalized certain kinds of knowledge."<sup>91</sup> The hegemonic hierarchies put forth through academies and such cultural institutions hide the relationship between power and art (essence) through the illusion of romantic artist (appearance).<sup>92</sup> Such persistent conceptions of artist-hero corrupts the postmodern "neo-avantgarde" by making it essentially a narcissistic "consummate,

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<sup>89</sup> Tia Denora, "The Social basis of Beethoven's style" in *Paying the Piper: Causes and Consequences of Art Patronage*. ed. Judith Huggins Balfe. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993)

<sup>90</sup> Michael Fitzgerald's *Making Modernism* can be considered the contemporary companion to Tia Denora's work. In his book, he charts the formation of the market for 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art from its origins in Paris at the turn of the century to its transfer to New York at the beginning of the Second World War by tracing Picasso's maneuverings in the network of dealers, critics, and museums to promote commercial success and critical acclaim. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995)

<sup>91</sup> Gordon Fyfe, "Art and its Objects: William Ivins and the Reproduction of Art" in *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations*. ed.s Gordon Fyfe, & John E. Law. (London: Routledge, 1988), 90

<sup>92</sup> Siegfried Kracauer connects the primacy of the biography, particularly its ascendancy into a literary form after the WWI, as not only the culmination of hero worship but also the unity of history and form. The biography stemmed from the unified structure of traditional novel form which was deemed as a reflection of supposed unity of character; thus "every historical figure already contains its own form ... begins at a specific moment, develops through its conflicts with the world, takes on contours and substance, draws back in old age, and passes away." Like the other bourgeois arts, this prose form denies any knowledge and all problems of form that threaten the bourgeoisie continued existence by harmonizing conflicts into a progressive telos ["The Biography as an Art form of the new Bourgeoisie" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1995), 101]. Thus art distances the bourgeoisie from less rarified spheres to evade an understanding of their own situation, a shelter from insights that question their existence; hence history itself becomes selective, distant, and contemplative.



cynical, self-celebratory” practice. Hence Donald Kuspit argues that romantic and contemporary notions of “art for art’s sake” is in fact a “refined mysticism of the medium ... art’s final defense against the threat posed to it by modern science and technology.”<sup>93</sup>

Our modern institutions of art originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the development of institutions such as the museum, secular concerts and literary criticism. With the increasing importance of market forces in art production, audiences had to be constructed through public exhibitions and the middle class entering into art needed guidance to what was famous and noteworthy; hence the critic and the academic positioned themselves as arbiters of taste and style.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, artists themselves were constructed through biographies and retrospectives and eventually came to define themselves as above the market. This created the contradiction of having to sell one’s work on the market, while posturing to legitimate one’s artistry through ‘suffering’. The self portrait became the highest expression for it not only immortalized the face of genius and was allied to the artist’s biography, but being non-commissioned and highly individual, it was seen as the most authentic expression of the artist. Courbet became the prototype of the modern artist whose oeuvre consisted of provocative and demanding works intended to bring honors, as well as “pot boilers” to make money.<sup>95</sup> Oskar Batschmann describes this contradiction epitomized by Courbet as disturbing for he was “obsessed with exhibitions and public success, and fascinated by making money, while consistently defining the artist as outside the state. At the same time, he insisted on his right to all the means of the state. He wanted to turn things upside down, cause scandals and arouse opposition, while taking every opportunity to exploit his customers and buyers and suit public taste.”<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, the institution of a romantic conception of the artist in most art histories and biographies elides the historicity of the status of the artist itself.<sup>97</sup> Jaap Van

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<sup>93</sup> Donald Kuspit, *Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8-9

<sup>94</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)

<sup>95</sup> Oskar Batschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World: the Conflict between Market and Self-expression*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997)

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 139

<sup>97</sup> The conflation of appearance with essence and fetishization of biography is perfectly embodied by Stanislavski’s method acting, the lionization of which is indicative of society’s inclinations. While early actors had no delusions about their ‘make-believe’, Stanislavski transformed acting into a craft with his “method” which is predicated upon the assumption that there is a

der Tas has sketched the shifts in the loci of power from amateur to professional artist through the decline of dilettantism. Dilettantism is the cultivation of arts by amateurs (which currently has the connotation of 'dabbling') that was originally based on a humanistic conception of man and the recognition of artistic occupations as special activities worthwhile in themselves. Initially, dilettantism was located in aristocracy, whose cultural leadership was legitimized through the 'gentlemen's ideal', where young aristocrats did a Grand Tour of the Continent and were trained to be reverent towards the ancients and the arts. Thus they became not only connoisseurs but practicing artists as well. It was their duty to perform at higher level than (and in competition with) "regular" artists who were to serve mainly as craftsmen (and who themselves aspired to the status of gentlemen). With the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, dilettantism was embraced by these rising classes as a form of emancipation that coincided with the emancipation of artists and intelligentsia which necessitated a new conception of both and their relationship to each other.<sup>98</sup> Where both spheres previously relied on court or aristocratic patronage, they were now institutionalized as separate spheres of society from which the cherished images of the man of letters and the artistic genius emerged as functions of bourgeoisie society.<sup>99</sup> Today the logic of the market has completely stripped the amateur of any power, for the professional has become synonymous with quality, skill and vision. Yet by instituting art (and academia) as spheres wholly separate from the socio-economic, the contradiction of the professional engaging in market relations and with the doctrine of pure art (or *l'art pour l'art*) and pure thought become harmonized.<sup>100</sup>

In art photography, this distancing of the art photographer from the amateur is achieved through techniques of darkroom manipulation. Black and white photography are the mainstays of fine-art photography for two reasons – unlike color photography, black and white negatives and prints cannot be processed by automated minilabs and have to be done by hand; and the ubiquity of color photography in amateur snapshots

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correspondence between the psychology of the character and its portrayal; and a 'convincing' performance meant the actor had gotten into the 'soul' of the character.

<sup>98</sup> One can perhaps locate this as one of the origins of the current separation of theory, technique and practice

<sup>99</sup> Jaap Van der Tas, "Dilettantism and Academies of Art: The Netherlands Example" In *Paying the Piper: Causes and Consequences of Art Patronage*. ed. Judith Huggins Balfe. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993)

<sup>100</sup> Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has argued that *l'art pour l'art* emerges precisely because art has lost its social function. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

transforms the black and white photograph into a sign that connotes "classic" and "art". Even art photographers who work in color opt to work in medium or large format color transparency instead of 35mm color negatives due to the "rigor" involved in producing a good color transparency in a larger format (and the Ilfochrome process that produces color prints from color transparencies is a highly specialized process that is inaccessible to the public). The issue surrounding digital photography for photographers is not manipulation but the ease of manipulation. In the traditional darkroom, the photographer has to spend hours manually dodging, burning and sharpening the detail of the fine art print as well as contending with the vagaries of print developing. Thus the quality of the final print is dependent on the craft of the photographer and the intuitive nature of the process ensures no one print is exact, and therefore retains a certain aura. However in a digital darkroom, the machine never tires of generating perfect duplicates of the digital photograph. Just as the camera lens challenged the draughtsmen and artists with its ease of rendering perspective, software and hardware have challenged the craft of photography and printmaking that the photographer had spent years perfecting. Thus the digital is deemed less worthy of art status because it short circuits the traditional process of recording, developing, and printing and is thus perceived as an incomplete and insufficient artistic process. We find again the same rhetoric (lazy vs hardworking, casual vs skilled and purposeful) used to separate professional from amateur photographers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>101</sup> Indeed Henry Rasmussen, the editor of *B&W* (a publication for collectors of fine art photography), has stated categorically that "Digital represents an element of modern technology while Conventional represents craftsmanship".<sup>102</sup>

Hence art photographers working in the digital medium have had to generate new auratic gestures to legitimize their work. John Caponigro chooses to celebrate manipulation by creating "naturescapes" which are digitally composited photographs – yet the celebration of such surrealist montages (which was allied with the 'revolutionary' nature of the technology) glosses over the achievements of surrealist photographers such as John Uselmann, Arthur Tress, and Connie Imboden who created their works

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<sup>101</sup> A good overview is given by Pamela Inglesby "A Photograph is Not a Picture"; Distinguishing Anarchy from Art in the Late Nineteenth Century" in *On the Margins of Art Worlds*. ed. Larry Gross (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995)

<sup>102</sup> Henry Rasmussen, Editorial in *B&W* 18 (Apr 2002)

without digital technology or without manipulation.<sup>103</sup> Like Ansel Adams, Caponigro wrote books detailing his techniques that legitimized his work as art, except that the craft of creating the photographic object is now located in the software; a mastery of the concepts and mysteries of gamma, adjustment curves, and color spaces. Other photographers, like Amy Lamb, have downplayed the digital aspect of their work. She takes color transparencies which are then scanned into a computer for printing. Her partial digital approach recognizes the suspicion of digital manipulation as she explicitly states that the transparencies are scanned as they are and not cropped or manipulated in the computer (which gestures towards the earlier auratic gesture of "visualization" i.e. unique vision that legitimized photography as art). Such hybridization between the digital and the older forms are auratic gestures to the uniqueness of one's digital image. As there is a tension between the 'ephemeral nature' of the digital image and its physical edition, digital photographers would typically include a discussion of the use of archival inks that guarantee a superior image than the traditional process in terms of longevity and vibrancy of color. Lightjet printers are extensively employed because instead of printing inks onto paper like an inkjet printer, they expose a sheet of photographic paper using lasers which is then developed using the traditional chemical process. There has also been a resurgence of interest in older printing techniques such as platinum printing where the photographer prints out a digital negative to be exposed.<sup>104</sup> This incorporation of older techniques is yet another auratic gesture that attempts to ease the tension between older and traditional forms.<sup>105</sup> Although Andy Grundberg was skeptical of the claims of a 'digital aesthetic' (arguing that only the recording medium has changed and current attempts at computer art merely duplicate visual tropes of painting and photography), he notes the potential of the digital to enhance the older process, as well as changing the form of the older analog medium.

Paradoxically, as the function of traditional silver-based photographs as carriers and conveyors of cultural messages decreases, their value increases. Stripped of their use value, they become commodities instead.

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<sup>103</sup> see John Caponigro's website at <http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/>

<sup>104</sup> Photographer Dan Burkholder wrote the first book, *Making Digital Negatives for Contact Printing*, detailing this technique. (Carrollton, TX: Bladed Iris Press, 1999)

<sup>105</sup> I see this practice as having some revolutionary potential for it implicitly critiques the discourse of digital as revolution and constituting a clean break from the older forms. Furthermore, it redeems photographic techniques and materials that have been forgotten since the advent of standardization and industrialization of the production of photographic materials. However it is also problematic for its practice does not reside in praxis but desire to be "different" from other photographers (i.e. product differentiation).

They are rarified and fetishized, treasured by art collectors and museums, who subject them to the traditional discourse of connoisseurship.<sup>106</sup>

With the recent stabilization of ink pigments that are guaranteed to be fade resistant for over 30 years, printer manufacturers have created the "digital photographer" market segment with high-end printers to meet such photographers' exacting needs for color reproduction. Thus it is not unusual to find 'gicleé prints' in galleries, a fancy name for a printout from an inkjet printer (albeit a very expensive one). It is as much a smokescreen for the uninitiated as well as an attempt to distinguish their status from the average amateur. Rosler observes that art photography perpetually defines itself against amateur and commercial photography "by stressing its distance from the recording apparatus; it often does so by relying on arcane theories of vision and on manipulation of the print, more recently on conceptual or critical-theoretical grounding."<sup>107</sup> But no auratic gesture is free of contradiction; a wry commentator observes that since "gicleé" is French for "sprayed" rather than a name for a process, it can refer to many things, "including a male cat spraying to mark its territory."<sup>108</sup> However proponents such as Malina argue that rather than adhering to existing art forms and notions of art, computer artists should create new contexts and exhibitions appropriate to the new practice (quoting Paul Brown) that "practitioners should not waste their time trying to convince the arts mainstream of the value of their work. Our involvement in SIGGRAPH ... Ars Electronica, FISEA and other events constitutes the evolution of an international and interdisciplinary Salon des Refuses."<sup>109</sup>

Allan Sekula critiques such elevated (incestuous) notions as the wish-fulfilling isolation of the 'author' that loses sight of social institutions that speak "by means of the commercial photographer's craft"; which like "so much else in photographic discourse, lies in its frequent misunderstanding of photographic practice."<sup>110</sup> Instead, he sees photography implicated in the emergence of science and technology as seemingly autonomous productive forces in bourgeois culture where "the question of the survival

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<sup>106</sup> Andy Grundberg, "Photography in the Age of Electronic Simulation" in *Crisis of the Real* (Denville, NJ: Aperture, 1999), 226

<sup>107</sup> Rosler, *Image Simulations*, 42

<sup>108</sup> Mark Dubovoy, "The Joy of Digital Printing" *PhotoTechniques* 24, no. 3 (May/June 2003)

<sup>109</sup> Malina, *Digital Image – Digital Cinema*, 36

<sup>110</sup> Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive" in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*. ed. Brian Wallis. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 124

and deformation of human creative energies under mechanization” has been elided and discursively harmonized.<sup>111</sup>

The institutional promotion of photography as a fine art serves to redeem technology by suggesting that subjectivity and the machine are easily compatible. Especially today, photography contributes to the illusion of a humanized technology, open both to 'democratic' self-expression and to the mysterious workings of genius. In this sense, the camera seems the exemplar of the benign machine, preserving a moment of creative autonomy that is systematically denied in the rest of most people's lives. The one-sided lyricism of this view is apparent when we consider the myriad ways in which photography has served as a tool of industrial and bureaucratic power.<sup>112</sup>

Adorno, who views art as containing society's truth and untruth notes that “absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole ... Indeed, art's autonomy shows signs of blindness.” One of which is its blindness to the concept of autonomy as a historical rather than empirical or natural construct.<sup>113</sup> The failure to perceive this and only see art as purely aesthetic is not just “reified consciousness” but to fall into an arrested dialectic with its continual denial of the promised utopia whereby “the artwork's sensual appeal seemingly brings it close to the consumer, it is alienated from him by being a commodity that he possesses and the loss of which he must constantly fear.”<sup>114</sup> Hence there is a need for critical reflection rather than the sensual immediacy offered by bourgeois art for “the bourgeois want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better.”<sup>115</sup> It is this “aesthetic hedonism” and forgetting that transforms revolutionary forms into mere aesthetic sensibilities whereby “dissonance congeals into an indifferent material, ... becomes a new form of immediacy, without any memory trace of what it developed out of, and therefore gutted and anonymous.”<sup>116</sup> Hence Peter Bürger argues that the autonomous status of avant-garde art is its own negation. By turning against the schools that preceded it and art as an institution, “art's lack of social impact becomes recognizable. The avant-gardist protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences.”<sup>117</sup> For Bürger, art is no longer possible due to the disappearance of the boundary between art and non-art by

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 125

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 125

<sup>113</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 15,

<sup>117</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22

the penetration of the commercial (such as marketing and mass media) into art and vice versa. Despite this,

it goes on regardless. Many stake their lives on it. It seems that the only chance of meaningful action in modernity is wholehearted acceptance of meaninglessness ... The new life will not come, but (postmodern) reference to it is essential.<sup>118</sup>

Kuspit views such postmodern "ironic appropriation" as mere submission to the visual and psychosocial status quo by reifying the already reified (i.e. a form of secular sanctification of avant-garde and kitsch art into aesthetic phenomena). He argues that irony is "resignation to the insight that nothing basic can be changed. The status quo can only be made more bearable; that is, one can learn to take a more flexible approach towards its rigidity."<sup>119</sup> Art cannot hope to break down its boundaries and still remain art for it had always moved in an elite sphere of privilege. Hence no real radical change can come as long as 'progressive' artists continue to perpetuate the institutional structures of thought. For Kuspit, postmodernism is essentially regressive by undoing or reversing "modernism's own reversal of values" which transforms practice into passive reaction rather than active assertion; it becomes standardized as a stereotype, "reifying it into a ready-made."<sup>120</sup> Any avant-garde intervention is pointless being divorced from a revolution in the world, transforming it into an

abstract regulator of art practice, rather than a social phenomenon whose disruptiveness signals the underlying contradictions and tensions in society. As such, it is acceptable to the world, which subsumes avant-garde products as superior decoration rather than resisting them as threatening interventions.<sup>121</sup>

Yet many fail to see the contradiction of such 'progressiveness', even going as far as to celebrate artists (such as Diane Arbus) who earn fame and/or fortune by capitalizing on the suffering of others; in creating imagery that "brings these people in their pristine state to the image market as commodities; their likenesses are distributed in books, magazines and newspapers, or as fine prints sold in limited editions to edify the wealthy."<sup>122</sup> Julian Stallabrass argues that such practices rely on the separation of two realms such that "the introduction of one to the other produces a picturesque and

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<sup>118</sup> Peter Bürger, "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics" *New Left Review* 184 (Nov/Dec 1990), 56

<sup>119</sup> Kuspit, *Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 103

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>122</sup> Julian Stallabrass, "Sebastio Salgado and Fine art Journalism" *New Left Review* 223 (May/June 1997), 139

marketable current. It may produce in the wealthy viewer a simultaneous frisson and comfort, like listening to rain lashing the windows."<sup>123</sup> Sven Lütticken is also leery of the radical chic in art practice, and considers the poles of pandering to the corrupt world (such as Warhol's transformation of art into a mass media circus), and of rejecting it (such as Batallie's retreat into secret underground) as equally problematic.<sup>124</sup> As both positions inevitably return to the gallery, he sees the need to create alternative structures and counter-spaces.<sup>125</sup> Under capital, the legacies of the classical avant-garde become mere pastiche in postmodern conditions,

Market interests permeate the art world; hype tends to prevail over criticism, and the simulation of theory over its enactment. The incomplete discursiveness of the art media is in part due to the commodification of the sphere—there are products to be sold and reputations to be made.<sup>126</sup>

The element of fashion in art is dependent on the profit motive and art's articulation into capital relations of production. The art market undermines autonomy by (c)overtly demanding artists furnish whatever style of work the market expects.<sup>127</sup> Deridre Robson has analyzed how these dynamics operate under the construction of the taste for modern art by museums and dealers who function as gatekeepers, as well as the role of modern art for collectors who procure them for either investment purposes or cultural capital.<sup>128</sup> Yet despite fashion's corruptibility, Adorno argues it is worth salvaging precisely because it "hardly denies its complicity with the (art) system, it is itself

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 151

<sup>124</sup> Sven Lütticken, "Secrecy and Publicity" *New Left Review* 17 (Sep/Oct 2002)

<sup>125</sup> While I am not entirely convinced of the possibility or feasibility of counter-spaces (and that it will not become the next dogma), Lütticken's analysis is correct in diagnosing institutional form as closure. Hal Foster has argued that ideology must be grasped less a matter of false consciousness of class origins than of the structural limits of ideological closure imposed on thought – differentiating between "political art" locked in a rhetorical code that reproduces ideological representations and "art with a politic" that is concerned with the "structural positioning of thought and the material effectivity of practice within social totality." ["For a Concept of the Political" in *Recordings* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 155]

<sup>126</sup> Lütticken, *Secrecy and Publicity*, 147-148

<sup>127</sup> Krystyna Warchol has interviewed émigré Polish artists in New York adapting to the capitalist system. Under communism, *chaltura* jobs were made available to artists (i.e. jobs that were artistic in nature and not just a sideline) which meant that artistic reputation was divorced from economic signifiers of value. In fact, many of canonized "great artists" were also poor sellers. The émigré Polish artists succinctly sum up the capitalist system thus, "In America, if you are good, you must sell. If you do not sell, it means you are not good enough." Hence art production becomes increasingly tailored to whatever tastes are in fashion. ["From East to West: Polish Artist in the New York Art World" in *On the Margins of Art Worlds*. ed. Larry Gross, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 122-123]

<sup>128</sup> A. Deidre Robson. *Prestige, profit, and pleasure: the market for modern art in New York in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Garland Pub., 1995)



disdained by that system." Thus the contradiction of artistic fashions makes it possible to recognize how the relations of art have become a pretext; "fashion is art's permanent confession that it is not what it claims to be."<sup>129</sup> For Poggioli, fashion conforms to Baudelaire's paradox whereby the chief task of genius is to invent a stereotype.

The chief characteristic of fashion is to impose and suddenly to accept as a new rule or norm what was, until a minute before, an exception of whim, then to abandon it again after it has become commonplace, everybody's "thing." Fashion's task, in brief, is to maintain a continual process of standardization: putting a rarity or novelty into general and universal use, then passing on to another rarity or novelty when the first has ceased to be such.<sup>130</sup>

Hence fashion constitutes a double denial. The promise of fashion gestures towards the utopias of uniqueness and progress, both of which fashion denies in its essentially homogenizing nature. Under this system, innovation is fetishized and commodified to become style; a belief in novelty for the sake of novelty where worldly success becomes the final arbiter of artistic value in the art world,<sup>131</sup> When style becomes a signifier for creativity and authenticity (such as in providing product differentiation and market segmentation to collectors), artistic innovation is explicitly used to win fame and fortune (and not just critical recognition). Kuspit sees such innovation as being corrupt in form,

He (the artist) gains fame and fortune for no clear accomplishment, but simply for being a stylish symbol, which is all that his production testifies to. Novelty is proof enough of his artistic power and credibility. There is no deep concern about the significance of the novelty; rather, the work takes its place in a predetermined scheme of art-historical significance once it has been confirmed as indeed novel.<sup>132</sup>

In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida brilliantly uses the invisibility of the *parergon* (or frame) around a painting in art discourse to refer to both the physical object that constructs the meaning of the painting, as well as the blindness of academics to (historical) "frames" in their thought.<sup>133</sup> Poggioli finds evidence of this in the description of current artistic trends as movements which connote dynamism, and past trends as

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<sup>129</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 315-316

<sup>130</sup> Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 79

<sup>131</sup> For Kuspit, "the pseudo-avant-garde artist believes that he is as socially offensive, and thus as critical and authentic, as the avant-gardists were, although in a different way. He believes that his art is equally risky, aesthetically and socially. He wants the cachet of critical offensiveness and riskiness, the birthright of every avant-garde artist." (*Cult of Avant-Garde Artist*, 102)

<sup>132</sup> Kuspit, *Cult of Avant-Garde Artist*, 20

<sup>133</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987)

schools which are “pre-eminently static and classical.”<sup>134</sup> It is this invisibility and power of form that leads Adorno to argue that “the function of art in the totally functional world is its functionlessness; it is pure superstition to believe that art could intervene directly or lead to an intervention.”<sup>135</sup> Art then, like academia, is a monad of the contradictions of capital society based on the same rational bureaucratic systems of exchange and logic. All debates on artistic ‘value’ (high art, low art, digital art etc.) forget that art itself is historically defined and always in hindsight. All art – no matter how avant-garde or critical of bourgeois convention, is itself bourgeois for Art itself is based on bourgeois economy and sensibility (e.g. creation of value, genius, and pleasure).<sup>136</sup>

A naïve belief in one’s autonomy ensnares one in the ethos of the system. True emancipation can only arrive by the recognition of the false totality of the system through its contradictions, revealing how its historical nature has been reified into second nature.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>135</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 320

<sup>136</sup> Under aristocratic and papal patronage, they were artisans and not artists. Mozart can be considered ahead of his time by attempting to break free of the patronage structure. However he failed where Beethoven and later artists succeeded because both the bourgeois taste for art, and its supporting institutional structures were virtually non-existent in his time.

### III. Real-ly to Real-lie

#### *digital revolution*

The digital image is a decoding because it frees the cinematic image from its material support, mobilizing it within a communicational network wherein it can be transmitted anywhere instantaneously; but it is also a recoding because, instead of being inscribed directly on a chemically treated surface, light is converted into information, mathematical data whose infinitesimal discreteness allows the real to be synthesized or recomposed.<sup>1</sup>

John Johnston's view epitomizes those of 'digital media' theorists and artists who have typically highlighted the 'digital' nature of the media in their work. A recent exhibition (*Photography after Photography*) dedicated to digital photography highlights some of these strategies.<sup>2</sup> Nancy Burson used digital manipulation in her *Chimaeras* series to create composite portraits from the facial features of film stars and dictators, while Keith Cottingham models a face out of clay and superimposes this generic face onto photographed bodies in his *Fictitious Portraits* series. The *Dystopia* series by Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher present the logical extreme of digital manipulation's perfection of reality where orifices such as mouth, ears, nostrils, and eyes are edited over to become a seamless patch of skin. Other artists opted to reveal the binary code in

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<sup>1</sup> John Johnston, "Machinic Vision" *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 1999), 39

<sup>2</sup> See *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, ed.s Hubertus Amelunxen, et. al. While an examination of the use of art by corporations to promote corporate interests and ideologies is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is nevertheless of interest that the exhibition's corporate sponsor was Siemens. A good explication of the relationship between corporation and art can be found in Mark Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

the belief it constitutes the essence of digital media; Michael Brodsky's *Transmission Interrupted* used images of disrupted downloaded images where only a portion is visible and the rest is digital noise, while Alba D'Urbano's *Hautnah Project* was a dual installation of both a suit produced with the artist's skin superimposed on it using digital technology such that it looks like a naked body, and the printouts of the binary code used in the production of the suit. Christiane Paul's overview of *Digital Art*, while laudable in documenting the various practices, is itself an archetype of the heavy-handed projection of theory onto practice by artists (and critics) in their various claims to redefine and rupture representations (a la Foucault/Kristeva/pick-favorite-theorist) as if by sheer will of utterance, the concept will match the subject.<sup>3</sup> Catalogs of digital art reveal a numbing sameness in ideas and execution, largely unremarkable were it not for the frame of 'art' foisted on the object.<sup>4</sup> Linda Nochlin, tracing the avant-garde oeuvre through 19<sup>th</sup> century France notes the larger complex of banal and forgettable works created in its name, observing that "as is so often the case, good intentions are no guarantee of innovating, or even memorable, imagery."<sup>5</sup> Such works, with few exceptions like the work of Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, are rarely thought provoking, or even comprehensible without an understanding of theory.<sup>6</sup> Even so, the claims of digital imaging to fracture old conventions is largely restricted to an elite art (and academic) practice, the majority of the technology embraced by commercial and amateur photographers is still used to perpetuate conventional forms of aesthetics and practices.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Genette, *The Aesthetic Relation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830-1880" in *The Politics of Vision* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989)

<sup>6</sup> I will suggest Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's *Bollywood Satirized* series works where others have failed by precisely not calling upon its digital manipulation techniques, and employing it towards a specific political intent (i.e. to spread awareness of the abuses of women in India). In this light, the 'experimental' work of other digital artists seem especially regressive in adhering to Romantic norms by addressing only a knowing bourgeois audience (steeped in 'cutting-edge' theory and social sympathy), and engaging in meditations of pure (Kantian) aesthetic issues divorced from everyday and social concerns. Reflecting on an exhibition of "cutting-edge" art, Daniel Herwitz notes that such confluences of form and theory fail precisely in "relying either on slogan and image to instantly engender thought or on heavy doses of theory to do the work for them. This reliance on mere reference to theory to empower their works of art with meaning cannot help but make one ask why one shouldn't, rather, dispense with exhibition entirely and simply read the books." [*Making Theory/Constructing Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 294-295] Furthermore, artists/critics fail to recognize that digital technology's claim to fracture reality is predicated both on the Romantic cult of the symbol, and the reification (and validation) of Cartesian notions of reality (for realism presumes an identity between object-representation). Regress becomes mistaken for Progress.

<sup>7</sup> Even the most radical 'digital' artists' use of the technology perpetuates the old forms of hero/visionary artistic practice and discourse.

A.D. Coleman considers new imaging technologies to be a double-edged sword in both making accessible the image resources of museums and collections to the average user (and not just the specialist), as well as enabling the manipulation of that imagery.<sup>8</sup> But manipulation and retouching is not unique to digital media – it has been present since the first Pictorialist montages, and more recently since Trotsky was erased from a photograph of Lenin addressing the crowd after his fall from grace.<sup>9</sup> Writers such as Mitchell arguing that the digital image democratizes access by short-circuiting the craft of darkroom manipulation assume that ‘straight’ photography is never retouched. They could very well leaf through Ansel Adam’s *Examples* where he details the steps he went through to produce forty of his images and shows the vastly enhanced ‘fine’ print side by side with the ‘work’ print.<sup>10</sup> In fact the practice of art photography is obsessed with the perfection of both the image and its surface where a bevy of techniques such as spotting, knifing, and bleaching are employed by photographers to smooth out any ‘imperfections’ in tonality and texture. By constructing the manipulation of the digital image as revolution, those writers forget that darkroom manipulation was not the sole means of manipulating the image. Outside of art photography, the mantle of manipulation typically fell upon the airbrush artist who have not only used the airbrush to retouch photographs in the past few decades, but also to produce photo-realistic images that can rival current digital productions. Digital manipulation, then, is not so much a revolution but the culmination of the expression of the desire to attain ‘perfect’ reality.

Fred Ritchin connects these practices of retouching to the raising of visual stakes in the mass media where “quiet emphatic” photos by photojournalists of the Dorothea Lange variety that inspire reflection are passed aside for “bang bang” photos that attract mass audiences. As a result of these trends, Ritchin observes that images today, particularly those in magazines, “tend to overpower human vision rather than resemble it” by being “more theatrical, better lit, sharper, and more highly colored than seeing itself” which makes them suited to electronic retouching systems.<sup>11</sup> Florian Rotzer

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<sup>8</sup> A.D. Coleman, “The Future of Photography: A New World” in *The Digital Evolution: Visual communication in the Electronic Age: essays, lectures, and interviews, 1967-1998*. (Tuscon, AZ : Nazraeli Press, 1998), 76

<sup>9</sup> *The Commissar Vanishes* by David King is a fascinating exploration of the use of image manipulation and censorship by the regime. (New York: Henry Holt, 1997)

<sup>10</sup> Ansel Adams, *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983)

<sup>11</sup> Fred Ritchin, *In our Own Image: the Coming Revolution in Photography: how Computer Technology is Changing our View of the World*, (New York: Aperture, 1999), 38

argues that the history of expectations held of the media "extend from the most exact reproduction possible, to the event as it takes place now with the complete elimination of the distance between it and the observer."<sup>12</sup> Hence the digital does not fracture reality, as much as it is the culmination of the wish image of existing practices to not only reproduce 'perfect' reality, but to hide any evidence of its production and its mediating nature.<sup>13</sup> As Gary McCarron notes, digital's discourse of perfection and progress absolves the need for critical investigation.

Perfect things are pre-defined as beyond the pale of ordinary scrutiny, the labor necessary for their production clinically excised from public view. Hence to describe a computerized copy as perfect, for instance, is to efface the economic foundations on which the technology and the concept are anchored.<sup>14</sup>

The erasure of signs of production is crucial to the digital image claims of perfection. The digital is assumed, on the basis of its appearances, to be networks of pure flow and exchange, enabling democratic access as well as manipulation and reproduction, which hides its archivic and inertic nature. The utopia of Capital is transposed onto the digital discourse whereby the camera, as an abstraction of the visible, hides itself and renders itself and its social and material relations invisible.<sup>15</sup>

The camera, true to its invisibility of mediation, has always hidden its nature for its etymology originates in the Greek *kamara* which refers to a room or vault; contrast this with its Chinese counterpart, *Xiàng Ji*, which literally means likeness-producing machine. The latter reveals the technological nature of the camera (and implicitly its

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<sup>12</sup> Florian Rotzer, "Re: Photography" in *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, ed.s Hubertus von Amelnunxen, et. al. (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1996), 19

<sup>13</sup> The fetish of producing 'grainless' images is but a manifestation of the historical bourgeois desire for an immersive media technology that creates the illusion of non-mediation; this is the mode of ideology itself. Hence Marx in *The German Ideology* uses the camera obscura as an analogy for ideology, whereby the projection is taken for reality and the mediating apparatus is rendered invisible. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970)

<sup>14</sup> McCarron, Gary. "Pixel Perfect: Towards a Political Economy of Digital Fidelity" *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 24 (2)

<sup>15</sup> It is precisely this unconscious and naturalization that makes photography more ideological than film. This manifests itself in the common understanding of the camera as merely a perceptual apparatus without questioning its mediating nature and view e.g. why is the 'normal' focal length determined as the hypotenuse of the film dimensions? Who determined this constitutes a 'normal' view? Who decided that the image ratios of 3R, 4R, 5R, and 8R are 'normal' frames?

associated social relations) that the former elides.<sup>16</sup> The Western conception of photography has been so naturalized that no one questions why if Arab and Chinese scholars had understood the optical laws necessary for producing a camera, was the camera only invented centuries later in Europe.<sup>17</sup> One can locate photography's first impulses in the European conceit of Realism, where verisimilitude, or an exact one-to-one correspondence with the referent, was valorized for its 'lack of artifice'; this combined with the archivic impulse created the impetus for its development.<sup>18</sup> This naturalization also explains the dearth of scholarship and information on the impacts of this Western view on other cultures (other than orientalist accounts of scandalized natives and captured souls) and how this technology was constructed as having value, and interpolated into other societies.<sup>19</sup> The power of the archive embodied by photography is noted by Douwe Draaisma, whose historiography revealed that the camera obscura's inability to preserve the image was not experienced as a fault in its time. It was only the invention of photography that made the camera obscura, retrospectively, a flawed apparatus.<sup>20</sup>

One can consider the photographic industry (i.e. the production of lenses, cameras, film, and related accessories) to be the monad of capital development and globalization. Before Bill Gates there was George Eastman whose monopoly is so

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<sup>16</sup> The argument that the camera is only a tiny version of the camera obscura obscures the former's intent and will to power via reproduction on the basis of optical laws. The Chinese form recognizes that distinction, hence *An Xiang* (darkened box) is Chinese for the camera obscura compared to *Xiàng Ji*, (likeness machine) which is Chinese for camera. Robert Nelson, in his introduction to *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance* has noted the lack of sustained scholarship on Arabic and Chinese optics which had predated the Renaissance and the Greeks. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) This blindsight can be attributed to the epistemology of the thesis form, as well as editing out potential threats to Western discourse of its progress.

<sup>17</sup> This elision implicitly assumes the invention of the camera was the consequence of superior European innovation and technology.

<sup>18</sup> André Bazin goes even further to claim that the impulses of photography originated in the psycho-social need to memorialize and stave off death. ["The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *Classic Essays on Photography*. ed. Alan Trachtenberg, (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980)]

<sup>19</sup> Part of the reason was it cannot be archived or was deemed unworthy of archiving. As empiricism only operates on the domain of presence, the absence of 'proof' (and empiricism's equation of 'proof' with truth) condemns the unvoiced to be unexpressed. Existing scholarship centers on European practices, be it a re-evaluation of European practices such as the work Jonathon Crary, or postcolonial scholarship such as Derek Gregory's work on colonial Egypt. As Immanuel Wallerstein notes in "Eurocentrism and its Avatars", our understanding of the social has always been (and still is) Eurocentric since its institutionalization in academies and universities. *New Left Review* 226 (Nov/Dec 1997)

<sup>20</sup> Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109

entrenched that it appears natural and scarcely problematized. This monopoly accounts for the American bias in existing histories of photography that constructs Eastman Kodak as being the leader due to superior technological developments – the history of photography in Europe prior to Kodak becomes constructed as flawed precursors to American technology, and its development since Kodak is elided. Yet Europe was the center of photographic production up till the Second World War; the German company Zeiss was not only then the world's largest camera company but had also pioneered and produced many of the lens and camera designs still extant today. George Eastman's support of the American involvement in World War II by offering the services of his company, as well as providing film and cameras for reconnaissance was not just for patriotic purposes. As a vital partner in the war effort, he would have a say in how the allies were compensated if the allies won – and it was no coincidence that part of the compensation included the physical and intellectual properties of German camera and lens manufacturers which essentially bankrupted them. Zeiss was decimated for the US took all its lenses in addition to its lens designs and plans, while Russia took its machinery, inventory and employees.<sup>21</sup>

From the hundred or so European photographic manufacturers prior to WWII, only three remain today after extensive rebuilding – Schneider, Agfa and Zeiss, who now produce almost exclusively for specialist markets.<sup>22</sup> As Minolta, Nikon, Canon, Yashica, and Olympus began producing and marketing consumer photographic equipment after WWII, Kodak found it could not compete with the Japanese cameras produced at a much lower labor cost and shifted its attention to developing film for different markets (of which it still has a monopoly) that were emerging after the war.<sup>23</sup> The current geography of photographic production corresponds roughly to the 'first', 'second', and 'third' world typology of Modernization theory. We have the 'first-tier' producers, such as Kodak, Nikon, Fuji, Agfa, and Rollei, in the U.S., Europe, and Japan who produce and market virtually all the photographic technology worldwide, in addition to having global

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<sup>21</sup> Typical of most companies, Zeiss' official history largely consists of a timeline of technical innovations and product roll outs. This history is reconstructed from fragments of various histories by collectors, historians, and old employees from newsletters and webpages; some good source available online include <http://www.contaxcameras.com/home/history.html>, <http://www.pshc.ca/zeiss.html>, <http://www.company7.com/zeiss/history.html>, and [www.zeisshistorica.org/sample.html](http://www.zeisshistorica.org/sample.html)

<sup>22</sup> Voigtlander recently rebounded after a period of insolvency and bankruptcy

<sup>23</sup> Kodak's monopoly also extends into the digital imaging market by controlling the patent for the PhotoCD format, as well as being a key manufacturer of Q60 targets which are used to ensure consistent color reproduction of imaging devices.



facilities.<sup>24</sup> The 'second-tier' producers, such as Seagull, and Kiev, in China and Russia whose products are generally deemed inferior because of 'communist' practices and the lack of quality control. Finally we have the 'third-world' periphery countries such as China and Malaysia who do the actual manufacturing and assembly for the 'first-tier' producers. The production of digital imaging equipment corresponds to the schema sketched above, but adds more periphery relations such as Singapore and Taiwan which manufacture circuit boards and components. Additionally, it integrates the monopolies of imaging production with those of electronic and computer peripheral manufacturers in the 'first-tier' countries such as Epson and HP. The democratizing power of digital technology is merely an appearance that hides the political economy of image-technology production and its core/periphery relationships.

Problematizing the mutability of the digital image elides the question of what it means to have the production of imaging technology monopolized by a few developed countries in a world increasingly defined by images.<sup>25</sup> The discourse of emancipation, choice, and control associated with digital technology only applies to the bourgeois subject in the developed world. Associations of the digital as being liberated from the material creates notions of 'cleanliness' and 'waste-free' which conceals the pollution in the peripheral countries from the chemicals used in the manufacture of electronic components. And what does the developed world do with its obsolescent electronics laden with toxic heavy metals? It ships them off to be dumped in developing countries such as India and China that are even less able to deal with them.<sup>26</sup> Both problems being exacerbated by the discourses of fashion and upgrades in digital technology. Julian Stallabrass points out that trash is "something which people make collectively, and not quite inadvertently. Its form and the manner of its making are closely tied to the materials of our commercial culture and our attitudes to its products and the

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<sup>24</sup> Korean manufacturers such as Samsung and Konica do not have the sufficient range of products nor the established history of production to compete at the same level as their Japanese counterparts. Hence they can at best be considered to be only second class 'first-tier' producers.

<sup>25</sup> The hegemonic quality of photography continues into its digital form – where previously, Western standards of ISO, ASA, DIN and the like became universals; digital imaging reveals the locus of U.S. production in the by imposing DPI (Dots Per Inch) and PPI (Pixels Per Inch) onto the metric world.

<sup>26</sup> Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, *Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia*, (2002) [<http://www.svtc.org/cleancc/pubs/technotrash.htm>]

environment."<sup>27</sup> The digital camera is able to take pictures of 'pristine' environments in the West because it has irreparably damaged those elsewhere. The digital *is* territorial.

Working through various economic theories, Christian Fuchs critiques such idealistic conceptions of the 'digital economy' as "immaterial labor", "post-industrial society" or "weightless economy."<sup>28</sup> He locates the origins of such perspectives in Adam Smith's conception of productive labor (which Marx has critiqued) as that which produces value; and from which bourgeois economics deduces that the production of a physical good is a sufficient condition for productive labor.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Marx and Deleuze, Fuchs argues that while appearances have changed, the production of information commodities still corresponds to the generation of surplus value and exploitation of labor power. In particular he critiques the illusion of "participation" which is understood in "a very narrow sense of the term that excludes overall societal and political issues and serves capitalist interests" that excludes the control of production and its means by the people who are called forth to 'participate'.<sup>30</sup> Noting the harmonization of the contradictions between capitalism and democracy, Fuchs argues that "capitalism... is an anti-participatory society, and participatory management is an ideology that helps to convince the exploited and dominated that their exploitation is just, fair, democratic and 'participatory'."<sup>31</sup>

The discourse of the revolution of the digital with its utopic promise of emancipation thus conceals how one is increasingly articulated into relations of production.

### ***peripheral nature***

The 'cybernetic capitalism' of desubstantialized commodities (such as data, copyright, and intellectual properties) is increasingly defined by the 'flow' of such abstract commodities (from which the principles of usage billing stem) where 'connectivity' is paramount. Deleuze and Guattari describe this production of flow as the

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<sup>27</sup> Julian Stallabrass *Gargantua* (London: Verso, 1996), 172

<sup>28</sup> Christian Fuchs "Software Engineering and the Production of Surplus Value". In *Cultural Logic*, 2002 [<http://eserver.org/clogic/2002/fuchs.html>]

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 26

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 39

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

“desiring-production” of Capital, arguing that “the rule of continually producing production, of grafting producing onto the product, is a characteristic of desiring-machines or of primary production: the production of production.”<sup>32</sup> In their schema of “desiring-machines”,

one machine is always coupled with another. The productive synthesis, the production of production, is inherently connective in nature ... there is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow ... Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows.<sup>33</sup>

In order to achieve infinite flow, desiring-machines have to “continually break down as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly.”<sup>34</sup> The obsolescence, both built-in and discursive, of electronics and digital technology constitute such a desiring machine by perpetually withholding the utopia of actualization in the continual creation of new needs and devices that promise greater satisfaction, only to be denied when they break down or become outmoded.

The digital imaging market is a monad of this desiring production predicated upon flow because purchasing a digital camera is not the end but the beginning of an integration into a circuit of production. Unlike ‘vintage’ cameras (manufactured prior to the advent of camera electronics) which were built to last, the modern camera is a desiring-machine that needs to be completed through a plethora of accessories and upgrades.<sup>35</sup> One is actually buying into a system of production because each manufacture has their own proprietary standards, which means that one has to select from a predefined system of lenses, batteries, papers, and inks necessary to achieve the advertised results.<sup>36</sup> The consumer believes he has freedom of choice by the range of accessories arrayed before him; he forgets those choices were already made for him.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 5

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>35</sup> The disposable camera can be seen as an exemplar of this continually breaking down to feed the circuit of production

<sup>36</sup> The discourse of digital imaging as “cheap” only appears so because the cost of materials, memory cards, battery packs, special inks and papers, etc. which are necessary to complete the circuit are excluded from the calculation.

<sup>37</sup> The marketing of digital cameras is largely directed towards the male consumer and his fascination with the latest gadgets and technical specifications. This has been consistent throughout the history of the mass-produced camera, with the exception of some early Kodak

Hence the camera is a *partial* object that creates a desire for these peripherals, and hides the nature of the system. Despite this, the consumption of those accessories express an utopic element of staving off obsolescence (albeit via consumption), which is denied by the discourse of progress.<sup>38</sup> Grant McCracken sees this utopic promise of the product as a “displaced meaning” which seeks to address the gap between the ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ in social life; he also coins the term “diderot unities” to suggest that there are patterns of commonality or links between consumer goods such that they seem fit in with one another, and with a particular lifestyle.<sup>39</sup> The production of camera (and computer) peripherals for the digital imaging market, however, constitutes more than a “diderot unity” based on lifestyle choices as these unities are imposed onto the consumer by producers through the above-mentioned systems of consumption; the end result being escalating upgrades for something even faster, smaller, and sharper in the desire to complete the system (which is further perpetuated by the element of fashion). Stallabrass notes the corrupt and contradictory nature of the “condition of transfiguration” such commodities aspire to whereby “there is a natural and organic connection, re-established in the purchase of the commodity, between its consumption and some form of good life. (Yet) when it trades on the promise of warm, direct human relationships, the commodity posits the very thing which it is responsible for destroying ... The point ... is always to conceal utility, and therefore labor, behind the image of utility.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, there is a tendency for branding to produce ever finer distinctions between niche markets (such as “prosumer” cameras, “advanced amateur” cameras etc.) to foster the illusion of a certain equality and individuality even though consumers are defined by marketers into segments of homogeneous ideal types. Hence the fetishization of the ‘digital’ aspects of digital technology by ‘new media’ writers conceals the even deeper embeddedness in capital relations. As Lukacs charges,

the bourgeois method is to consider the machine as an isolated unique thing and to view it simply as an existing 'individual' ... to view the machine thus is to distort its true objective nature by representing its function in the capitalist production process as its 'eternal' essence ... this approach makes of every historical object a variable monad which is

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cameras and the current *Ixus* series by Canon which specifically targeted the female consumer through their ‘feminine’ or ‘stylish’ designs.

<sup>38</sup> The connective interfaces such as FireWire and USB contain within them the utopia of democratic access and equivalence which contravenes the proprietary practices of the industry.

<sup>39</sup> Grant McCracken, *Culture and consumption: new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988)

<sup>40</sup> Stallabrass *Gargantua*, 158

denied any interaction with other - similarly viewed - monads and which possesses characteristics that appear to be immutable essences.<sup>41</sup>

In the early days of photography, one was able to build one's own camera with a lens from Europe and all the photographic literature one could find, occasionally enlisting the services of a cabinet maker. The first commercial cameras, like the *Wundershrank* and the optical devices it housed, were expensive and the "playthings and objects of culture of the noble and rich and probably would not have been available to the average peasant if he had had the wherewithal to purchase them."<sup>42</sup> The introduction of the Kodak camera in 1888 is credited with constructing new markets, uses and meanings through the reduction of the expense and bulk of cameras. Previously, cameras and other optical devices were the affair of the petit bourgeoisie; the notion of domestic or consumer photography for the masses now developed in tandem with the construction of leisure and tourism as well as the need to document those activities. The current discourse of portability, reproducibility, and "instantaneity" of the digital camera is but the culmination of the wish image of the technology from its inception and allied with the bourgeois concerns with leisure and documentation (which is why collecting is its valued practice). One of the earliest cameras, the Carte-De-Vista camera circa 1860 was the first to manifest this desire for reproducibility even before the advent of negatives. The camera contained four or more lenses to expose different plates, or different parts of the same plates simultaneously, thus one was able to obtain multiple copies of the 'unique' daguerreotype. The forerunner of Polaroid and digital photography's "instant" picture was the Dubroni Appartus of 1865 which had a hole with a stopper that allowed the photographer to introduce solutions, through a squeeze bulb and pipette, required for sensitizing and developing the plates from within the camera. Prior to the introduction of the Kodak, portability was already achieved by miniature and spy cameras introduced in the 1860s.<sup>43</sup> However perhaps the most important innovation was Walker's Pocket Camera which was a small portable box camera built on a system of interchangeable parts and sold as a complete outfit with optional accessories. It was a marketing

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<sup>41</sup> Gyorgy Lukacs. "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." In *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 153

<sup>42</sup> Harry I. Gross, *Antique & classic cameras* (New York : Amphotos, 1965), 80

<sup>43</sup> These spy cameras reveal the gendered locus of the technology for they were in the form of gentlemanly accoutrements such as vests, canes, and watch fobs.

technique ahead of its time which has since become de facto practice.<sup>44</sup> Hence the market success of the Kodak camera was not in its technical innovations but in positioning the camera for leisure consumption rather than for the hobbyist. To achieve this, Kodak created nostalgic vignettes in its advertising and constructed the role of the camera as a source of keepsakes and mementos – the “Kodak moment”.<sup>45</sup> Yet despite the appearance of emancipation through mass adoption, the Kodak camera was actually regressive for it marked the separation of technique and practice of photography in its promises of “no focusing, no finder required”, and “you press the button, we do the rest”.<sup>46</sup>

A.D. Coleman criticizes the ‘user friendliness’ of the Kodak camera celebrated by historians; arguing it that it not only made it unnecessary for camera users to process their own film and make their own prints, it also made it impossible. In the separation of the act of exposure from development and printing, Eastman’s system undermined any impulse to learn the processes of photography;

(when) a continually widening segment of the public was acquiring craft expertise in the first democratically accessible visual communications system. The Kodak No.1 – by appealing to people’s capacity for laziness - allowed the ‘luxury’ of foregoing any study of that craft ... by permitting camera users to remain ignorant of the processes they were employing, this approach to photography remystified the medium - made of it a prototypical ‘black box’ - right at the juncture when its demystification was underway.<sup>47</sup>

For Coleman, the long term agenda of the industry amounts to a social lobotomy by making photography easy and mindless. Such ‘ease of use’ appears to democratize the medium but actually creates an inscrutable black box that users have no control over, other than to act within the parameters defined by the producers.<sup>48</sup> Rather than

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<sup>44</sup> Eaton S. Lothrop, Jr. *A century of cameras from the collection of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Morgan & Morgan, 1973)

<sup>45</sup> Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000)

<sup>46</sup> This separation of technique from practice is seen today in the multitudes of commercial and art photographers who only know how to ‘point’ and ‘shoot’ but have no inkling of photographic theory and the developmental processes.

<sup>47</sup> A.D. Coleman “The Hand with Five Fingers: or, Photography Made Uneasy”. In *The Digital Evolution: Visual communication in the Electronic Age: essays, lectures, and interviews, 1967-1998*. (Tucson, AZ : Nazraeli Press, 1998), 83

<sup>48</sup> A common fallacy is to read democratic elements into technologies that purportedly afford access and choice. However democracy resides not in the ability to vote (means) but in the ability to shape the system (ends). By reducing democracy to mere choice, such perspectives fail to consider how choice is constructed a priori. Appearance is taken as essence.

understanding and taking control of its development, all users have to do is to consume and trust in the technology.<sup>49</sup> Having no knowledge of the workings of the black box, users have no means to change it or to produce alternatives, and thus are disciplined (to use Foucault's term) to rely on the system of desiring-production. The illusion of a photograph being an objective, unmediated record of reality arises from this alienation in the image-making process whereby knowledge and reflexivity are arrested, and totality denied.<sup>50</sup> Stallabrass has argued that the increasing automation in camera design actually makes it less functional and creates complexity in the proliferation of dials and buttons and presets.<sup>51</sup> These create value for the manufacturer for the camera becomes valued not for its utility or the quality of its image, but in the number and sophistication of features detailed by marketers in specification sheets. Hence manufacturers "design sophisticated products which solve problems that did not really exist prior to the technologies intended to fix them."<sup>52</sup>

The culmination of such alienating practices is embodied by the design of the digital camera. Tarleton Gillespie has argued that the design of technology is not neutral but has consequences whereby the tool is not only intended for specific uses, but also frames those activities by presuming the world to work in particular ways.<sup>53</sup> Design has always been a complex of functionalism, commerce styling and desire.<sup>54</sup> Consider the increasing abstraction of view in the camera designs leading up to the digital camera; there has been a shift from viewing/focusing on the film plane (which had an exact correspondence to the image), to the use of a separate viewfinder (which approximated the image), to the LCD screens and viewfinders of digital cameras (which simulate the

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<sup>49</sup> This separation of theory, technique and practice is responsible for the elevated status of art and commercial photographers today.

<sup>50</sup> Julian Stallabrass argues that the workings of camera are essentially simple although contemporary camera design has progressively relieved the user of this power by automating and computerizing the first exposure, the relation between shutter speed and aperture, and focusing" (*Gargantua*, 18) The resulting complexity creates a market for parts, technicians, and future 'improved' products. This is an instance of how mediation presents itself as unmediation (i.e. consumers believe they are in control). Stallabrass notes that "consumers (like voters) are quite powerless when it comes to the particulars of the packages of 'features' which they buy in the form of a camera" (*Ibid.*, 17)

<sup>51</sup> "Professional" cameras actually have less features, being generally constructed for reliability and ease of use

<sup>52</sup> Stallabrass, *Gargantua*, 21

<sup>53</sup> Tarleton Gillespie "The Stories Digital Tools tell" In *New Media: Theories and Practices*, ed.s Anna Everett & John Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 111-112

<sup>54</sup> A good primer can be found in Peter Dormer's *Design since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993) and John Heskett's *Industrial Design* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997)

image).<sup>55</sup> Digital imaging alienates the user by adding more perfect black boxes. While it was still possible to build or repair your own manual camera with sufficient skills and knowledge (thus directing the technology), the electronic components of digital cameras preclude understanding or reverse engineering. It is impossible to build the electronic components without a prefabrication and manufacturing plant, or to skirt past patent suits.<sup>56</sup> Similarly the algorithms used to interpret, render, and manipulate the image also effectively preclude any alternatives or understanding.<sup>57</sup> Hence the practice of image making shifts from the pre-visualization of film-based cameras to the post-processing of digital cameras; the former ensures one has achieved all possible controls to produce the desired image before releasing the shutter, the latter applies those controls to produce the desired image after the picture is taken.<sup>58</sup> The seemingly bewildering possibilities of digital imaging with its instant sepias and mosaics appear to give the user control over the image, but conceal that such control is predefined. We become a culture of preset images.

This preset imagery also stems from the hegemony of an elitist Western aesthetic and practice (evidenced by the plethora of instructional guides to taking 'better' pictures) which results in what Coleman calls "cryogenic imagery" – a "sizable, steadily growing repertoire of archetypal images, any variation of which is recognized by all and sundry as a 'good shot'," whereby "the camera user needs only to scan the field of vision

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<sup>55</sup> The word 'simulate' in this instance refers to the technical process rather than a postmodern concept. See footnote 53 on false color for more details.

<sup>56</sup> Most of the information required to build those components is either protected by patents or the trade secrets act. As photography became commercialized, information on techniques and manufacture which were previously publicly available became guarded and considered proprietary knowledge.

<sup>57</sup> The image one sees on the screen or on the printout is actually false color, rendered according to "photorealistic" conventions. As conventional image sensors are monochromatic, a Bayer mask (which is a mask of colored dots) is overlaid on the sensor to filter out differing color wavelengths to simulate color sensitivity. In addition, unlike film where a chemical reaction takes place to couple dyes to the silver grains, proprietary algorithms are used in digital imaging devices to map the digital signals onto a color palette to produce images pleasing to consumers; hence the notion of user having complete unmediated control is an illusion because the images the user works with has already been preset.

<sup>58</sup> The valorization of the digital camera's ability to preview and delete images stems from the Western practice of taking redundant shots and selecting from them the best one. This practice has emerged because of the abundance of affordable film in developed countries, as well as the 'disposable' consumption ethic – where the image as well as its material substrate is disposable. In other countries such as South America where film was hard to come by, photographers abhor such wasteful practices and instead privilege the carefully considered and composed shot. Fred Ritchin makes a passing reference to these differences in practices in *In our Own Image*.



until the lens comes across a new instance of one of these archetypes.”<sup>59</sup> Even the amateur photographer internalizes these preset codes of production.<sup>60</sup> The modernist aesthetic, once the fashion of the avant garde, has become the standard practice of amateurs. Its rules of exposure and composition are valorized and reinforced in photo schools, magazines and clubs – which in turn are perpetuated by camera manufacturers developing new features (and desires) to ‘solve’ those (constructed) “problems”.

Stallabrass notes how in assessing amateur photographs,

Judgment is rarely based on aesthetic matters alone, but rather on conformity to an apparently endless sequence of rules matching technique to subject, which no amateur, no matter accomplished, can be expected to know. Each rule is discrete, parasitic on subject matter and, taken together, they have little coherent shape.<sup>61</sup>

The stock photo as a generic image is an apt parable for this shift in the quality of image production. Getty Images and Corbis Inc., which dominate the market, not only supply images but also determine the style and content of the images they archive and produce. Paul Frosh observes that these images are all variations of standard views for they are selected or commissioned on the (contradictory) principle of “generic specificity” whereby “the image must be open to use, interpretation and alteration in a variety of different contexts for a diversity of purposes and products” in order to achieve maximum sales.<sup>62</sup> The emergence of photography as a media profession disconnects the production from the distribution of photographs which is rationalized into intellectual and reproduction rights – thus making it impossible for viewers to see the real relations of power behind the “photographic performance.”<sup>63</sup>

The valorization of flow conceals the material substrate. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Frosh recognizes the circuit of the system relies on constructing subject positions and desires, and making them appear natural and ‘democratic’,

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<sup>59</sup> Coleman, *The Hand with Five Fingers*, 81

<sup>60</sup> Michael Griffin has a good overview in “Between Art and Industry: Amateur Photography and Middlebrow Culture” in *On the Margins of Art Worlds* ed. Larry Gross (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). He analyzes how the role of amateur photography is situated between art and commerce, and how the dominant aesthetic is reinforced and reified in amateur camera clubs, magazines, instruction etc.

<sup>61</sup> Stallabrass, *Gargantua*, 20

<sup>62</sup> Paul Frosh, “Rhetorics of the Overlooked: On the Communicative Modes of Stock Advertising Images” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no.2 (2002)

<sup>63</sup> Paul Frosh, “The Public Eye and the Citizen-Voyeur: Photography as a Performance of Power” *Social Semiotics* 11, no.1 (2001)

The total assemblage of practices and relationships of public image-production seems to be a self-perpetuating system that is indifferent to encounters with the material viewer ... because the system produces abstractions of subjective viewing positions (such as the 'end user', 'consumer', 'market segment', or 'demographic') that are both internal to its own functioning and hegemonic across the whole culture, and into which individuals are expected to slot.<sup>64</sup>

The desiring-machine goes beyond the production of accessories; it incorporates us into its circuit by turning us into an accessory of the system. We have become peripheral beings.

### ***real(i)ty***

The construction of the digital as a revolution, contains the utopia of transcending material relations. Jameson argues that such promises of an "inauguration of a whole new type of society" has an "obvious ideological mission of demonstrating, to their own relief, that the new social formation no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism, namely, the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle."<sup>65</sup> Coleman, reflecting upon the acquisition of the Bettman Archive by Corbis Corporation, notes that the digitization of archives extends beyond the technical concerns of indexing, organization, and portability; such investments are made in order to make money out of the archive by selling licensing rights and access. Thus even though it is technically easier to access a digitized archive, it ironically become less accessible through the optioning of rights.<sup>66</sup> Our current 'postindustrial' society, as Jameson puts it, "far from being inconsistent with Marx's great nineteenth-century analysis, constitutes, on the contrary, the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas."<sup>67</sup>

Bernard Edelman describes photography as having the "strange, unique, original characteristic of being acquired through superposition on an already established

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<sup>64</sup> Paul Frosh, *The Public Eye and the Citizen-Voyeur*, 48

<sup>65</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". *New Left Review* 146 (Jul/Aug 1984)

<sup>66</sup> A. D. Coleman, "What Hath Bill Gates Wrought? The Future of Image Archives". in *The Digital Evolution: Visual communication in the Electronic Age: essays, lectures, and interviews, 1967-1998*. (Tucson, AZ : Nazraeli Press, 1998)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

property.”<sup>68</sup> That is, the subject does not create in the sense of a painter, or potter, but must stake claims on existing reality, i.e. photographers must somehow be able to claim ownership of the ‘reflection of the real’ in their photographs, which is in turn ‘produced’ by their cameras and film.<sup>69</sup> Thus photography was already in an abstract exchange relation with property that existing copyright law exacerbates. It was this recognition that photography constitutes property by appropriation (and not merely to the reproductive nature of the medium) that photography was not considered an art form in its early years. The eventual recognition of the photographer’s creativity by law, affording them copyright protection, only came about when due to industrialists’ fears of losing trade secrets to competitors when the use of photography became widespread in the industrial and commercial sectors. Hence the clause not only states that it is desirable that photographers should be afforded legal protection, but also “2. that the reproduction of photographs should equally be prohibited when it is used in the work of industry, craft manufacture or manufacture.”<sup>70</sup> These rights were granted discursively through aesthetic appeals, but Edelman notes how these “pseudo-aesthetic considerations are subtly mixed with openly commercial considerations...(where) the aesthetic is subordinated to commerce.”<sup>71</sup> Crucial to this reformulation of the photographer’s role is in the transformation of the status of the photograph from a rendering of reality produced by camera and film, to the product of the photographer’s technique which was seen to be commensurate with an artist’s craft. Hence photographers since have constructed their discourses and practices around various techniques in visualization, darkroom manipulation, etc. as a demonstration of their mastery of craft; thereby investing these practices and the photograph with the personality of the artist (as well as constructing the photograph as a production rather than a reproduction). The machine becomes subjectivized through technique.

Peter Drahos notes the historical change in the definition of property from a thing to a rights relation between persons and sees this change as creating an economy of abstract objects which are “liberty-intruding privileges of a special kind” that promote

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<sup>68</sup> Bernard Edelman, *Ownership of the Image: elements for a Marxist theory of law* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 38

<sup>69</sup> It was this property by appropriation that made photography suited to the colonial project of economic and cultural expansion. Photography had multiple roles in colonial administrations; on the one hand it had the obvious functions of documentation and surveillance, on the other it created the image of the exotic that created spaces for tourism.

<sup>70</sup> Edelman, *Ownership of the Image*, 50

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

“factionalism and dangerous levels of private power.”<sup>72</sup> Yet such contradictions are harmonized when the property system obfuscates the nature of the social relations and renders itself as natural rather than historical. In *Electronic Highway Robbery*, graphics designer Mary Carter describes her mounting paranoia that someone else would appropriate her works to publish them for “fame and fortune” and expresses her frustration and fears over the lack of control over her work in electronic media, such as tampering; but in particular “the unscrupulous infringer who downloads it, makes posters, and sells them.”<sup>73</sup> She claims that the “information is free” credo anthropomorphizes information, which ignores the creator of information and thus “shift responsibility for the movement of information onto the information itself and off of the shoulders of those who are, in fact, moving it around.”<sup>74</sup> Such arguments are typical of those supporting copyright law which are always addressed in extremis where everyone is assumed to be unethical or thieves a priori (which is a reflection of an economy run on selfish interests). It also operates by collapsing incommensurate levels whereby the protection of the circulation of your work is akin to protecting one’s credit ratings, personnel and medical records from falling into the wrong hands. The justification for this protection is based on the assumption that it would provide incentives for quality work and innovation – which is the conflation of copyright with patents and trade secrets. But the discursive power of copyright law is not just in the ‘commonsense’ logic of equal exchange, its conflation of moral and reproduction rights creates a slippery slope whereby sundering the property relation also means surrendering the right not to be tampered with, and be properly attributed to. This results in the loose definition of the author-creator subject which leads media lawyer, Lesley Ellen Harris to claim that,

there is nothing inherently intellectual about intellectual property. IP (Intellectual Property) is a finger painting created by a child or a letter written to your aunt. It is the article you write for your synagogue, church, or office newsletter. It is an email message, or the text or image you post on your Web site. It is also the basis of the new economy, and of course, of the high-paced entertainment and computer software industries.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Drahos. *A philosophy of intellectual property*. (Aldershot : Dartmouth, 1996), 4-7

<sup>73</sup> Mary E. Carter, *Electronic Highway Robbery: an artist's guide to copyrights in the digital era*. (Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 1996), 157

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-159

<sup>75</sup> Lesley Ellen Harris, *Digital Property: currency of the 21st century*. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1998), 5

According to Carter, the digital era “doesn’t mean we get to toss out traditional behavioral precepts that have served personkind over millennia ... they persist. Reason is, they work.”<sup>76</sup> It surely is a testament to the power of Capital that the social relations of production, and notions of private property that have only existed in the past two centuries or so now appear to be a natural law rather than historical human constructs of inequality. The history of the commons is edited out, or appropriated to argue that it constitutes a ‘tragedy’ that bourgeois economics rectified.<sup>77</sup> Yet proponents of copyright law fail to recognize the fatal contradiction in their stance; the appeals to the commandment of “thou shalt not steal” contravene the selfish bourgeois economics of Capital predicated upon Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest. If one takes the history of property in totality, they in fact are the real thieves for appropriating the commons; and where the aristocratic property owners had an obligation to their serfs, the bourgeois had none except to themselves. Ironically, notions of copying and use as theft are not only the product of capital relations, but also constitute control and restrictions of the ‘free flow’ that bourgeoisie economics celebrates. Yet this again is harmonized, when Harris argues that,

it might have been ‘funny’ to steal IP when it belonged mostly to megacorporations like IBM and Microsoft ... but it is quickly losing its humor as it becomes equivalent to stealing your neighbor’s bicycle ... as we realize that IP relates to what we all do and create every day, whether at home or work, we are more likely to guard our own property, and as a result, we are likely to be more respectful of IP that belongs to other people.<sup>78</sup>

Through appeals to bourgeois sensibilities, corporate interests become conflated with personal interests; where you are not protecting a corporation’s monopoly but your own interests. Ah, the sophistry of an economy of self-interest.

Recently, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants released a handbook detailing a variety of methods for calculating the value of one’s Intellectual Property (IP). If one examines the formulas closely, one can see a chain of problematic assumptions of increasing abstraction – the formulas are based on projections, which are based on hypothetical figures, which are in turn based on the assumption that

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<sup>76</sup> Carter, *Electronic Highway Property*, 160. This form of argument is similar to *vox populi* whereby quantity becomes justification for truth. Under this logic, slavery and serfdom are the best forms of social organization because they have persisted the longest.

<sup>77</sup> see for example, Garrett Hardin “The Tragedy of the Commons” *Science* 162 (1968), 1243-1248

<sup>78</sup> Lesley Ellen Harris, *Digital Property*, 158

returns will always be higher with intellectual property (IP) protection in place. The core assumption being that IP protection increases the quality and hence one is able to charge and sell more, which contradicts the (assumption of) self-interest motives of producers to maximize profit by reducing quality.<sup>79</sup> Ironically, these formulas and assumptions offend all the basic economic principles they described earlier in the same text. First, the principle of substitution where “no prudent buyer will pay more for a discrete intangible asset than the total cost to construct an intangible of equal desirability and utility” – on what basis will producers be able to charge and sell more if there are royalty-free and public-domain alternatives? Second, shifts in supply and demand causes costs to increase and decrease. Third, externalities (i.e. external conditions) cause the asset to be worth either more or less than its ‘original cost’; yet the formulas and assumptions assume a reified *ceterus paribus* reality which contravene the purported ‘dynamism’ of the market.<sup>80</sup> As if these abstracted figures were not bad enough, copyright owners have combined fallacious figures with loopy logic. Part of the letter from BMG (Bertelsmann Music Group) reads,

There are 250 Million blank CDRs and tapes bought and used this year for copying music in comparison to 213 Million prerecorded audio media. This means the owners are only being paid for 46 per cent of the musical content ... Even without a degree in economics everyone should realize that such trends will result in the music industry ceasing to exist.<sup>81</sup>

Even without a degree in economics, everyone should realize that such arguments are not only specious but fraught with logical fallacies. Just as no one questions the figures of projected losses of copyright owners and watchdog organizations like the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America); no one questions the inequalities of the system. The system shelters itself and is naturalized, concealing that the ‘logic’ of the market is actually illogical. As Siva Vaidhyathan observes, “copyright has in the twentieth century really been about the rights of publishers first, authors second, and the public a distant third.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Consulting Services Team, American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. *Valuing Intellectual Property and Calculating Infringement Damages: a nonauthoritative guide.* (New York, NY: The Institute, 1999.), 45-57

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>81</sup> see full text at [<http://www.theregister.co.uk/content/54/28009.html>]

<sup>82</sup> Siva Vaidhyathan. *Copyrights and copywrongs: the rise of intellectual property and how it threatens creativity.* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 11

Harris even claims that copyright is broader than an economic one and cites Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights where “everyone has the right to protection of moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author”, but she fails to question exactly how universal are those rights, and who drew them up, and who has vested interests in positing them as universal.<sup>83</sup> The law shelters inequalities, and is itself a mess/mass of fragmented contradictions that are reified and ritualized that elevates its status as somehow beyond the socio-economic spheres it administers. Nicholas Blomley has noted that the practice of law itself appropriates history selectively for its purposes, thus creating a bad totality by decontextualizing precedents and eliding alternatives.<sup>84</sup> The law as ‘justice’ hides its prejudices, making its historical nature appear natural and transcendent. Hence Edelman argues that, the law “presents the double necessary function of, on the one hand, rendering effective the relations of production and, on the other hand, concretely reflecting and sanctioning the ideas men form of their social relations.”<sup>85</sup>

The construction of copyright as serving one’s interests and promoting the production and distribution of intellectual property is a result of such historical blindness. Copyright originated as censorship to control the production of books by only allowing members of the Stationer’s Company guild of printers, to print books which had to be approved by the Crown; professional authors had no declared standing before the law.<sup>86</sup> David Saunders argues that the emergence of ‘modern’ copyright law in England was due to the distribution system of books rather than a change in machine technology of printing,

(hence) the Copyright Act of 1710 is a sign not only of print technology’s capacity to increase the rate of production of copies of a book but also of the profitability that generates disputes, litigation and lawyers. Of itself, however, print guaranteed neither literacy nor profit. People actually need a reason ... to learn to read and write in the first place.<sup>87</sup>

Saunders notes that while different legal systems have come to construct the legal personality of the status of author in different ways, at different times, and for different purposes; the definition of author’s rights became increasingly defined by the contracts

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<sup>83</sup> Harris, *Digital Property*, 115

<sup>84</sup> Nicholas K. Blomley, *Law, Space, and the Geographies of Power*. (New York: Guilford Press, 1994)

<sup>85</sup> Edelman, *Ownership of the Image*, 22

<sup>86</sup> Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and copywrongs*, 37

<sup>87</sup> David Saunders, *Authorship and copyright*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 39

they entered into with publishers as the structure of the industry changed. The author became part of the system of production and distribution, whereby the alienation of author, work, and public results in rights becoming an abstract object to be traded. Thus copyright transforms into speculative commodities which have "an existence independent of the author, moving from owner to owner for diverse durations depending on investor's calculations of advantage and return."<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, copyright stems from the belief that the artwork is the "ineffable, coded, cherished formulas of flesh and blood artists, physical manifestations of years of training, experience, and creative expression, plus plain hard work."<sup>89</sup> As such it is an auratic gesture that dreams of the utopia of the unique work and the autonomous artist by immortalizing the relation between artist and work; thus attempting to stem the alienation of the artist in the system of art production, as well as the death of the unique work. Yet in supporting existing discourses, artists become blind to their own historicity; eliding other practices such as the workshops during the Renaissance, choosing instead to perpetuate the romantic heroic myth of the lone genius. This Robinson Crusoe fantasy constructs the illusion of the autonomy of the artist and intellectual, despite the fact that art and academia had never been autonomous from relations of production since their conception. By attempting to conceal the ephemeral nature of themselves (and their work), intellectuals reproduce the reifying impulses of Capital. It is ironic that in the attempt to recover their marginal status in socio-economic life by gesturing to a time when art and thought was 'relevant' to society, intellectuals themselves become reproduced as commodities in that very system that brackets them as separate from the socio-economic.<sup>90</sup> Thus intellectual property is the key relation that denies art and academia from its utopia of 'enlightenment' by placing them into exchange.<sup>91</sup> This is because in order for works to enter into relation to one another to be exchanged, their 'guardians' must themselves place themselves in relation to one another to be exchanged – does it mean that Ansel Adams is thrice the artist of Paul Strand if his

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 140

<sup>89</sup> Carter, *Electronic Highway Robbery*, 156

<sup>90</sup> Copyright contains its own contradiction which is the denial and utopia of the auratic gesture i.e. it promises to redeem the essential relationship between author and work but its functioning sunders that relationship by placing them into exchange. It is this quality of utopia and its denial that makes it the monadic form of Capital.

<sup>91</sup> The practices of art and academia reproduce the system by encouraging the repackaging and reiteration of reified canons, and thus obstruct genuinely original thought that might fracture the system.



prints cost three times more? As Adorno has noted, "there is no freedom as long as everything has its price, and in reified society things exempted from the price mechanism exist only as pitiful rudiments."<sup>92</sup> This transmutation of quality into quantity is exemplified by the criterion of material expression in copyright law whereby the reification into the material becomes the basis for property and the criterion of creativity itself. Hence copyright lawyer Arnold Lutzker advises that "string together 15-20 words (much like a poem) and you have sufficient creativity for copyright."<sup>93</sup>

A digital asset is not merely one that exists in digital form, or generated by digital means; it is also one which has value if adapted to the digital form (i.e. it constitutes property by appropriation).<sup>94</sup> What then are the impacts on historical consciousness? Just as images are becoming raw materials for manipulation, will the digital, its will to power located in the archaic grid, reduce history in the same way? We already see this happening in the conflation of the moral and property regime, where property is transformed from oppressive nature to moral right. This is the achievement and legacy of an economics of self-interest, the fetish of individual particulars conceals and denies the totality of relations; the discourse of the personal hides real reifications which conceal how such economics contravene the principles of democratic society it espouses.<sup>95</sup> Sven Lütticken observes that the triumph of legalism means that true folk forms are no longer possible (for forms such as folk music are based on a continual dialogue via creative appropriation and reuse) and cautions how draconian intellectual property laws can be used to stifle creativity and critique (it is ironic that the original intention of intellectual property law was to protect and promote creativity and critique).<sup>96</sup> The tactics of copyright owners and organizations such as RIAA and BSA (Business Software Alliance) demonstrate the illusion of democracy and individual power in Capital societies

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<sup>92</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Messages in a Bottle" *New Left Review* 200 (Jul/Aug 1993), 7

<sup>93</sup> Arnold P. Lutzker, *Content rights for creative professionals : copyrights and trademarks in a digital age* (Amsterdam; Boston: Focal Press, 2003), 10

<sup>94</sup> Harris, *Digital Property*, 15-16

<sup>95</sup> Capitalism was never democratic; its engine of inequality contradicts the discourse of democratic equality. The historical unconsciousness it engenders results in the forgetting that the original dreams and impulses of the communist and socialist revolutions was to build a more democratic society than capitalist 'democracy'. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in capital society is commonly interpreted as a satire against communism (or its variant) yet no one seems to notice that the downward slide begins when the pigs buy into capitalist (human) practices.

<sup>96</sup> Sven Lütticken, "The Art of Theft" *New Left Review* 13 (Jan/Feb 2002)

where corporate interests matter more than the individual.<sup>97</sup> Robert Brady, in explicating the collusion between fascism and organized capital, shows that the most dangerous threat to democracy is not the emergence of Hitlers but the organization of power under capitalism.<sup>98</sup> Benjamin's cautionary epilogue succinctly describes the illusion of participation and equality of fascism,

Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.<sup>99</sup>

By capitalizing the digital, academics and artists have aestheticized it and elided how it is capitalized, thereby concealing its essentially regressive form.<sup>100</sup> Doing so not only reifies but colludes with problematic (Romantic) structures of the "state of the art" as well as the state of the "art" they purport and appear to reject. The digital, then, is not only mired in Capital, but its discourses and practices manifest the very thought structures of Capital. Paradise is neither lost nor regained, but systematically denied.

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<sup>97</sup> This is essentially corporatism (i.e. fascist form). Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* described schizophrenia as the psychological corollary to Capital flows; a notion I would radicalize by inverting it to argue that capitalism is schizophrenia (which is essentially about experiencing manifest reality in a different register) that creates and perpetuates historical blindsight. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983)

<sup>98</sup> Robert Brady, *Business as a System of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943)

<sup>99</sup> Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In *Illuminations*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968)

<sup>100</sup> An unpublished interview with Jacqueline Lichenstein cited by Paul Virilio illustrates how such aestheticization naturalizes and promulgates violence and injustice: "When I visited the Museum at AUSCHWITZ, I stood in front of the display cases. What I saw there were images from contemporary art and I found that absolutely terrifying. Looking at the exhibits of suitcases, prosthetics, children's toys, I didn't feel frightened. I didn't collapse. I wasn't completely overcome the way I had been walking around the camp. No. In the Museum, I suddenly had the impression I was in a museum of contemporary art. I took the train back, telling myself that they had won! They had won since they'd produced forms of perception that are all of a piece with the mode of destruction they made their own." [*Art and Fear* (London: Continuum, 2003), 28]

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## Appendix: Presentation Documentation

- The following table was projected via OHP to clarify the form and aims of the project

|                  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|
| <b>Immanence</b> | <b>Demonstrate</b><br>Aesth(ethics) of Be-ing<br>Form as meaning & Rhetoric            | Blindsight *<br>Historical consciousness<br>Institutional limits on knowing<br>Illusion of non-mediation |
|                  | <b>Show</b><br>Utopia & Denial of its Promise<br>Identity-thinking / Fallacy of Levels | <i>Palindigm</i> *<br>Subverting paradigms<br>Allegory<br><i>Auratic gesture</i> *                       |
| <b>Ideology</b>  | <b>Tell</b><br>(Mode of Thesis form)   | Academic theories & Artistic<br>practices of digital<br>photography<br><i>Archivic grid</i> *            |

- The fugue from **Shostakovich's Prelude & Fugue no. 4** was performed to show how the written text corresponds to Baroque continual variation form, and to demonstrate how that form of logic proceeds differently from linear logic. The two fugue themes were first played separately and the listeners were asked to listen to how the repetition of each theme in the fugue always occurs in a new context which illuminates different dimensions of the theme; and how the interplay between the two themes enables different relationships to be drawn between the two. This demonstration was then briefly related to the micro and macro formal structures of the text.

- To show how form creates meaning and illustrate how dominant paradigms can be subverted in practice, the **Ballad** from my poetry collection **Psychedelic Dreams** was cited to show how the traditional ballad prosody and meter (typically used to idealize and romanticize) becomes subverted in evoking a degraded and pragmatic form of love.

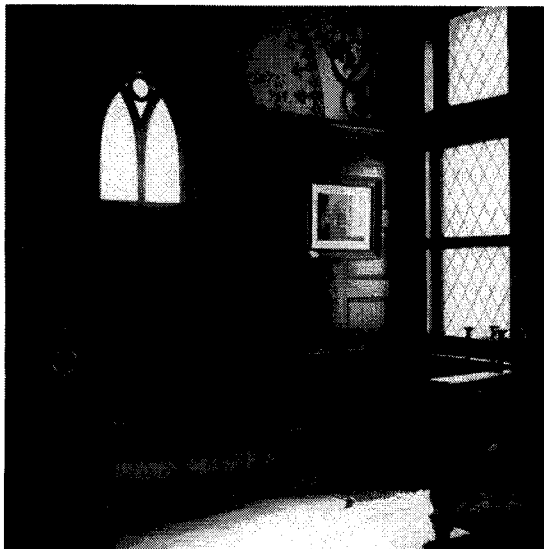
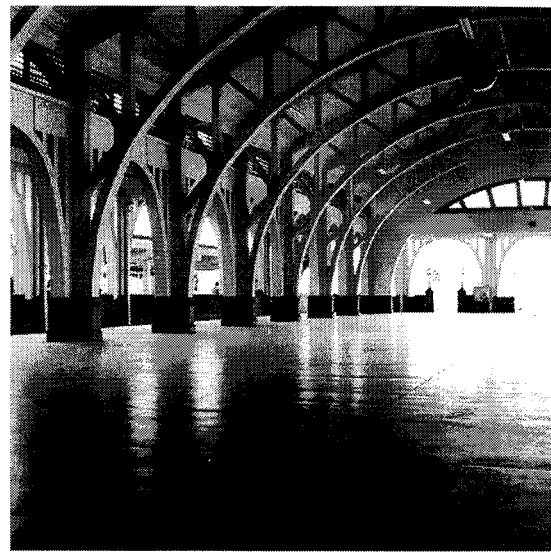
### Ballad (from "Psychedelic Dreams")

Oh yes I know the price of love  
your cost is but my gain.  
For fifty I am cooing dove,  
or bitch, or whore, or dame.

Seduction is but art of war  
the moaning of your name.  
I come on cue and beg for more  
so you can catch your train.

This primacy of form is then linked to project's rationale for analyzing and critiquing forms of thought – particularly how notions of 'progress' by some artists and academics (exemplified by theories and practices of digital photography) are as 'corrupt' as what they claim to transcend.

● To show how dominant forms of thought can be subverted in practice, I exhibited some samples of my fine-art photography and explained how they contravened aesthetic conventions, particularly when the subject of the photograph is not an object but the space subtended by objects.



● As an example of how bourgeois privilege can be used productively, I performed a mezzo-soprano aria, **Saint-Saëns' Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix (Samson et Dalila)** to show how dominant gender paradigms can be subverted and called into question (as to their historical nature) through a redemption of older (or 'traditional') forms. This is linked to the decision to write a 'traditional' text as a project instead of a multimedia installation.