

# Virulence and Digital Culture

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# Virulence and Digital Culture

Ryan E. Artrip

## ABSTRACT (academic)

This dissertation is a theoretical study of the role of virality/virulence as a predominant technological term in the reproduction of social and cultural information in the digital age. I argue that viral media are not new phenomena, only the name is new. Media have always behaved as viruses; it is only when they become hyper-intensified in digital technology that their virulent function surfaces in language and culture. The project examines processes of self-replication and evolution undergone by various new media phenomena as they relate back to the global profusion of social networks, data centers, and cybernetic practices. Drawing from several contributions in media theory, political and social theory, and critical media studies, I argue that digital media have a hyper-intensifying effect on whatever objects, subjects, or realities they mediate or represent; thus networked societies are virulently swarmed by their own signs and images in information. Through an examination of three primary categories of digital proliferation—language, visibility, and sexuality—I situate digital culture in a framework of virulence, arguing that the digital may be best understood as an effect of cultural hyper-saturation and implosion. I argue that virulent media networking processes come to constitute a powerful cybernetic system, which renders the human subject a mere function in its global operations. Lastly, I begin to develop a political critique of cybernetics, claiming that the proliferation of information, digital media, and communicative/representational technologies in the contemporary world emerges through an intensified ideological, economic, social, cultural, and metaphysical framework of productivism. This intensification engenders a system, or series of communicational circuits, whereby all techno-subjective activities are strategically stimulated, networked, recorded, and algorithmically appropriated to strengthen and reproduce 1) a global productivist system of cybernetics; 2) The material and ideological conditions for such a system to exist and thrive; 3) limitless virtual and digital production.

## Virulence and Digital Culture

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### ABSTRACT (public)

What does it mean to 'go viral' in the digital age? What kinds of technical and cultural distribution processes are involved in the viral circulation of informational media? Are there particular behavioral qualities, principles, or tendencies of information which lead to the popular metaphorical language of viruses as a means of describing its circulation in/through new media technologies? Does the popularization of viral media as a form/function of the digital age somehow mark a new, more democratic mode of mass media distribution compared to the golden ages of television, radio, and print media, respectively? To what extent do viral media represent a mode of informational production and distribution which is less dependent on the interests, ideological directives, and intentions/motivations of those in power? This dissertation examines the cultural and historical significance, social sensibilities, political possibilities, and broader philosophical meanings and implications of contemporary technological viral media culture. I develop a theoretical framework for understanding 'digitality' as the most recent peak, or a point of saturation, in a long history of accumulation: namely, the accumulation of linguistic and visual expressions of human reality through the explosive development of western civilization. Digital information technologies emerge, in part, as various managerial means of compressing and regulating the overproduction of such expressions. Thus, I argue, it is not so much that digital culture and viral media mark a new era, but rather an accelerated aggregation and intensification of old forms of technology and culture. This leads to a social reality in which informational media are generally found to proliferate, or 'go viral', almost instantaneously, and on a global scale. I argue that the technological network operations of the current so-called digital era of western culture—which is also the era of viral media, online social transparency, and the widely-celebrated democratic "freedom of information"—tends to mask increasingly complex, fragmented, and insidious forms of power and cybernetic social control. Through algorithmic manipulation, humans increasingly become mere functions of technological operations. Humans disappear into the digital operations of their machines.

*To François, with gratitude*

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What I possess, seems so far away to me,  
And what is gone becomes reality.

-J.W. von Goethe<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "*Was ich besitze, seh ich wie im Weiten, Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten.*" Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Faust*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 66-67.

**Part I**

**Digitality**

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: Digitality, Digital Culture, and Technological Virulence

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Digitality is with us. It is that which haunts all the messages, all the signs of our societies. The most concrete form you see it in is that of the test, of the question/answer, of the stimulus/response. All content is neutralized by a continual procedure of directed interrogation, of verdicts and ultimatums to decode [...]—the cycle of sense being infinitely shortened into that of question/answer, of bit or minute quantity of energy/information coming back to its beginning, the cycle only describing the perpetual reactualization of the same models. [...] Everywhere the same "scenario," the scenario of "trial and error" [...], the scenario of the breadth of choice offered everywhere ("the personality test")—everywhere the test functions as a fundamental form of control, by means of the infinite divisibility of practices and responses.

-Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Introduction

This dissertation is a theoretical study of the role of virality/virulence as a predominant technological term/phenomenon/concept/principle/force in the reproduction of social and cultural information in the digital age. I argue that 'viral media' are not new phenomena, only the name is new. Media have always behaved as viruses; it is only when they become hyper-intensified in digital technology that their virulent function surfaces in language and culture. This study contributes a symptomology of digital proliferation, the analytics of which look at various cultural and social effects of contemporary media saturation, and its historical/epistemological foundations (or lack thereof). Moreover, it develops a dynamic theoretical understanding of the contemporary explosion of hyper-communicative, networked 'new media' technologies, which accounts for 'digitality' not purely as a new emergent historical 'break' or 'rupture', but rather as a violent implosion

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 115-116.

resulting from the hyper-intensification of several perennial tendencies of western civilization.

The following pages examine processes of self-replication and evolution undergone by various new media phenomena as they relate back to the global profusion of social networks, data centers, and cybernetic practices. Drawing from several contributions in media theory, political and social theory, and critical media studies, I argue that digital media have a hyper-intensifying effect on whatever objects, subjects, or realities they mediate or represent. Thus, networked societies are virulently swarmed by their own signs and images in information. Through an examination of three primary categories of digital proliferation—language, visuality, and sexuality—I situate digital culture in a framework of virulence, arguing that the digital might be best understood as an effect of cultural hyper-saturation and implosion. I argue that virulent media networking processes come to constitute a powerful cybernetic system, which renders the human subject a mere function in its global operations. Lastly, I begin to develop a political critique of cybernetics (or, at least, I begin to engage the question of whether such a critique is possible). I claim that the proliferation of information, digital media, and communicative/representational technologies in the contemporary world emerges through an intensified ideological, economic, social, cultural, and metaphysical framework of productivism. This intensification engenders a system, or series of communicational circuits, whereby all techno-subjective activities are strategically stimulated, networked, recorded, virtualized, and algorithmically appropriated to strengthen and reproduce 1) a global productivist system of cybernetics; 2) the material and ideological conditions for such a system to exist and thrive; 3) limitless virtual re/production.

The goal of this introductory chapter is to begin to develop and situate a generalized understanding of 'digitality' or 'the digital', its epistemological stakes and, particularly, the terms of its reproduction. I begin with the following overview/analysis of the digital reproduction of subjectivity as a central component of the framework built within this dissertation.

## **2. Digital Subjectivity and its Reproduction**

Subjectivity undergoes a constant reproduction in the digital. Today, everyone is a subject, and it seems that every subject is expected to perform as an author, each faced with the task of affirming his/her/their reality and individuality. Authorship—a category which traditionally serves as a kind of disciplinary mark of legitimacy, and as an ideological construction/expression of the sovereign subject<sup>2</sup>—saturates the digital cyberscape of today's world. In virtually every corner of the Internet, one encounters signs of the authority and legitimacy of the author-individual, as if there was a panicked demand to reaffirm, re-anchor, and re-concretize a kind of expressive authenticity and legitimacy of the individual.

In a sense, each blog entry, status update, tweet, and user comment occupies the former place of the Catholic confessional: "the confession of the flesh" in which "everything had to be told."<sup>3</sup> Foucault described the act of confession as "a ritual of

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault writes: "If we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. [...] The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the moment in which we fear the proliferation of meaning." Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 221-222. See also Patricia Mooney Nickel, "The Institutionalization of Author Production and the Performance Imperative as an Ontological Fiction," *Cultural Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2013): 53-69.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). 19.

discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement."<sup>4</sup> In some sense, the ritual of confession continues within digital culture in intensified forms, and as a mechanism of the discursive reproduction of one's individual subjectivity. Yet, despite this proliferation of the author-subject, it also seems as if authorship has disappeared, or that the author has died along with the possibility of originality, as Roland Barthes famously claimed.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps authorship is dead in one sense, but its death triggered the panic of its own mass production or reproduction. The signification of the author swarms digital culture as/with a constant torrent of its virtual machinery: blogs, tweets, and the many forms of social media output available for users to jump online and type/tap/talk into the void. Thus, I suggest that the proliferation of authorship in the virtual arises concomitantly with the author's supposed disappearance. More broadly, throughout this dissertation, I theorize the dynamism of configurations/relations between proliferation and disappearance as a defining characteristic of digital re/production. Moreover, I theoretically develop 'digital culture' as a generalized concept/expression of the situation in which the signs of a culture swarm, proliferate, and saturate a void left behind after that culture's disappearance.

To return to the task at hand in terms of the reproduction of subjectivity, in the digital, Nicholas Rombes suggests: "we witness the viral spread of the author concept."<sup>6</sup> The potentialities of representational new media production in a hyper-individualist Web

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1978), 146.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Rombes, "The Rebirth of the Author," in *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (Toronto; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 440.

2.0 media ecology<sup>7</sup> have clearly helped to accelerate the author's re-materialization with a vengeance. "Today, anonymity is a sign of guilt, or failure."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, signs of the author (and a generalized dogmatic faith in authorship) proliferate throughout a recently emergent "culture of 'self-disclosure'," as Geert Lovink puts it.<sup>9</sup> On most prominent digital social networks, people face an overwhelming imperative to expose their identities, to make their worlds signify through a digital circuitry of ceaseless transparency and exposure (but also of technological obscurity). Today, we are all authors. "We are all *auteurs*. We are all writers. We are all filmmakers. And we are all theorists, because what we make theorizes itself."<sup>10</sup> This digital ecology of the Web. 2.0 author-function perpetuates itself, or propagates itself by absorbing, demanding, and reproducing the activities of subjectivities. It is parasitic, perhaps, but not forceful. Its operations spread throughout technoculture not by means of repression, nor by enforced conformism, but rather by continually engendering a mediascape of supposed freedom and transparency, which dominates the individual by hoisting him up to the level of the author, and by provoking/reproducing his ideologically authorial self-identification.

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<sup>7</sup> See José van Dijck and David Nieborg, "Wikinomics and Its Discontents: A Critical Analysis of Web 2.0 Business Manifestos," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (August 1, 2009): 855–874. See also Cathy N. Davidson, "Humanities 2.0: Promise, Perils, Predictions," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 476–489. Lastly, for a linguistic analysis examining the semiotic structure of Web. 2.0 environments, see Mark Warschauer and Douglas Grimes, "Audience, Authorship, and Artifact: The Emergent Semiotics of Web 2.0," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 27 (March 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Rombes, "The Rebirth of the Author," 440.

<sup>9</sup> Geert Lovink, *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge; Malden, Mass: Polity, 2011), 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

For Louis Althusser, a similar type of reproduction of individual subjectivity takes place through processes of what he calls "interpellation."<sup>11</sup> Althusser thinks the concrete subject is a kind of foundation<sup>12</sup> through which the reproduction of ideology<sup>13</sup> is made possible, but it is also a principle function which always necessarily takes place in the reproduction of ideology.<sup>14</sup> For Althusser, however, it would be a mistake to think that humans exist first in a state of nature as some originary non-subjective substratum which, in turn, (bourgeois) ideology molds into subjects, because, he claims, "you and I are *always already* subjects."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the conditions of ideology are reproduced almost 'organically' through simple acts of speaking, writing, and everyday social locutions that form "rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects."<sup>16</sup> The ideological interpellation of concrete subjects is, then, a kind of unavoidable fact of communication. In digitized social/cultural communicative media and networked sites of digital culture, where communication is instantaneous, hyper-mobile, and imperative, these everyday rituals/practices of authorial interpellation are hyper-activated and hyper-intensified. What occurs, in effect, is an overproduction (or, perhaps, over-interpellation) of subjective

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<sup>11</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), 264.

<sup>12</sup> This is, of course, opposed to the foundationlessness of the subject found in Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, and elsewhere in later psychoanalytic theory. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Regarding the generalized psychoanalytic understanding of the subject as lack, see also Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Althusser defines ideology here as: "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 256.

<sup>14</sup> "The category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects." *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

identification. Or more accurately, this constitutes an overproduction of the signification of subjectivity.

But where does this overproduction, or accelerated “subjectification”<sup>17</sup> come from, if not from a coherent and unified locus of power that actively enforces it? Speaking indirectly to this question, Gilles Deleuze articulates an important dynamic of subjectification found in Foucault’s work: “the more power tries to conquer subjectification, the more new modes of subjectification form.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, there occurs an ever-greater fragmentation and multiplication of modalities of subjectification as more and more interests of power appropriate the social signification of otherness and identity. Because there is no centralized power that deploys a singular ideological program, a plurality of forms of subjectification emanate from a plurality of loci of power, forming a massive fragmentary complex. I posit that the digital overproduction of subjectivity outlined above describes a cybernetic system in the abstract: its sum of symptoms and mediatic effects, which are rooted in a fundamental collective sense of absence, loss, or disappearance.

Jodi Dean describes an important dimension of (the subject’s) absence or loss in digital culture when she claims that subjectivity (and, I would argue, also objectivity) is today faced with “decline of symbolic efficiency” in communication.<sup>19</sup> By this she means

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<sup>17</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990). See also *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault Seminar at the Université de Paris VIII* (Paris: May 6, 1986), French National Library sound archive. [Passage was translated and transcribed in] François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari Intersecting Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 327.

<sup>19</sup> Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: This Is What Democracy Looks Like,” in *Communication and the Economy: History, Value, and Agency*, ed. Joshua S. Hanan and Mark Hayward (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 153. See also Slavoj Žižek, “What Can Psychoanalysis Tell Us about Cyberspace?,” *The Psychoanalytic Review* 91, no. 6 (December 2004), 811.

that there has been a crucial loss in the functional ability of language to signify meaning/represent across generational, cultural, and social divisions.<sup>20</sup> Why this loss/crisis of communication/failure of representation takes place, however, is not altogether clear. The loss or “decline” launches individuals into an aporetic state of insecurity and uncertainty about what Dean describes in Lacanian terms as their “ego identities,” and the identities of others.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the loss cultivates a panicked demand for authentication, discovery, and cognitive recovery by means of representational (social, digital) technologies. Conveniently, contemporary social media welcome this panic with prefigured digital architectures and virtual infrastructures of operations that, more often than not, are functionally designed in favor *not* of satisfying/extinguishing this generalized panicked demand, but rather are rigged in favor of reproducing its very conditions. This cultivates in digital culture a kind of cult of exposure and transparency. The demands on cyber-subjects (which are intensified and exploited by social networks) to ‘participate’ and ‘interact’<sup>22</sup> in digital culture(s), via self-exposure/self-expression/self-representation, ceaselessly proliferate through media like a virus through a body.

It should be no surprise, then, when Mark Zuckerberg, Chairman and CEO of Facebook, states: “Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.”<sup>23</sup> The interpellation/reality imperative is such that one must possess individuated ‘integrity’ as a singular self, and one must always reflect one’s self-integrity by transparently *representing* a sole authentic identity publically (digitally). But what if no such reified,

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<sup>20</sup> Dean, “Communicative Capitalism,” 153.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding this ideology of participation, see Lev Manovich’s concept and discussion of “the myth of interactivity” in Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 55-61.

<sup>23</sup> Zuckerberg quoted from an interview in David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2011), 199.

concrete identity is to be found? It becomes simulated. What if one lacks the self-singular kind of authenticity demanded by the network? Hypothetically, the subject panics to find it, producing a deluge of self-signification along the way. There occurs, in Jean Baudrillard's words, "a proliferation of [...] objectivity and authenticity. [...] there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential [...]."24

At the outset, it is worth pausing briefly in order to make a few important terminological (and, consequently, also theoretical and methodological) distinctions and clarifications. Firstly, the terms 'the real' and 'reality' are predominantly used throughout this dissertation in Baudrillard's general sense of them. My usage of 'the real' is not in a positive sense of referring to an objective totality, nor to a subjective particularity or condition. Rather, this term broadly refers to any sign, image, or representational signification of a supposed reality. My interest is not in the '*substance*' of reality, but rather in its *sign-value*; what most concerns me is not the *content of the real*, but rather the multitudinous *contents of its representation*. Moreover, although I do not think it is necessarily altogether incompatible with Lacanian understandings of 'the real', my use of the term is much broader than, and *not* indebted to, the psychoanalytic tradition. Lastly, as a disclaimer, I generally resist making any unified claim about the existence or non-existence of a coherent or structural real/ity. When such claims (or hints of such claims) appear, they should be read as playful expressions of narrativity, which most often serve rhetorically and strategically as articulations of particular polemical points, or as con/textually specific aporetic expressions of contradiction, paradox, and uncertainty.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> As a related side note, the general approach taken by this dissertation is diagnostic, and thus it avoids the development of a consistent and coherent normative ethical critique (for several reasons

To return to the abovementioned topic of a panicked “production of the real,” I argue that the processes by/through which this type of production occurs predominantly take place on the level of self-expression, and through global/ized circuits of digital communication. The identarian demands for transparency/meaning, touted by networks such as Facebook, effectively hyper-activate a mode of supposed discovery on the level of individual identity. In so doing, these demands 1) further reify the neoliberal subject<sup>26</sup> via ideological reproduction<sup>27</sup>; and they 2) help to proliferate a wild and ceaseless swarm of signification. Amplified through digital media, this situation constitutes an overproduction/over-signification of self-identification and self-expression. This culminates in an exacerbated mode of the subjectification/interpolation/reproduction of subjects in/of digital culture(s). These demands—namely various instances of the generalized demand on the subject to fill its absent or empty ontology<sup>28</sup> with contrary signs of its identity—are systematically technologically appropriated, reproduced, and exacerbated to engender a constant informational production of representational-communicative network activity and subject-produced virtual contents. Theoretically, capital de-virtualizes these media contents, then it transforms them into value and profit. Take, for instance, the communicated signification of one's identity that is constantly provoked and reproduced on Facebook. Here, one's identity is recorded, coded, and algorithmically programmed to trigger relevant advertisement contents, which are in turn

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which are later discussed). However, when normatively charged language appears, it does so in the same spirit of playful narrativity, *not* in service of developing an ethical critique.

<sup>26</sup> See Wendy Brown, “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37–59.

<sup>27</sup> See Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8-9.

<sup>28</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2008).

strategically marketed back to the original user-subject.<sup>29</sup> It is not enough to signify one's identity, but one must also buy and consume it. This marketing, tailored to one's identity, has the additional effect, perhaps, of interpellation—user-subjects effectively have their own repackaged/recycled/re-signified identity 'fed back' to them (similar to automated electronic "feedback").

### **3. Mechanisms of Cybernetic Feedback: Feedback as a Conditional Principle of Digital Reproduction and/of Culture**

Indeed, these processes constitute a digital feedback system. According to General Systems Theory (and building on the work of Norbert Wiener's general theory of cybernetics), the "feedback principle" articulates operations within a system by which "the result of behavior is always scanned and its success or failure modifies future behavior."<sup>30</sup> The digital informational contents (output) which a user chooses to click, tap, or view on a social network (input) are recorded and utilized by algorithms, which systematically manage/control/determine the output of future contents. Each instance of a user's activity constitutes a signaled "event" which is "codified" and recorded by the system for future appropriation.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the network operates as a continual loop of event-information-event. This forms what Wiener called a "chain of the transmission and return of

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<sup>29</sup> For an outline of how Facebook's organizational mechanics work, see the patent application for its "Newsfeed" component: Mark Zuckerberg et al., "System and Method for Dynamically Providing a News Feed about a User of a Social Network," February 14, 2008, [http://worldwide.espacenet.com/publicationDetails/biblio?CC=US&NR=7669123&KC=&FT=E&locale=en\\_EP](http://worldwide.espacenet.com/publicationDetails/biblio?CC=US&NR=7669123&KC=&FT=E&locale=en_EP). I analyze these particular mechanics in greater detail in chapter four.

<sup>30</sup> Lars Skyttner, *General Systems Theory: Problems, Perspectives, Practice*, 2nd ed. (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2005), 102. See also Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 48-73.

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the technical operations of symbolic codification of information, see Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1964), 16-18.

information," or "the chain of feedback."<sup>32</sup> The re-signification emitted from a digital social network's provocation and re-provocation of its user-subjects in the continually reproduced event—the chainlike cycle of informational overproduction and consumption—almost perfectly characterizes the feedback chain mechanics of a cybernetic system, as they are described by Wiener.<sup>33</sup>

However, this description accounts for only the first of two distinct types of circuit info-feedback traditionally theorized in cybernetics: 'positive' feedback<sup>34</sup> versus 'negative' feedback. Positive feedback describes how a system records some type of input by means of a certain program of operations, and automatically alters or adjusts some aspect of its program according to an indicated/measured difference between the user input and the system's 'desired' value.<sup>35</sup> A system is programmed to 'learn' and self-improve functions according to more optimal, efficient, instrumental operations. One may infer that, generally speaking, the goal of a cybernetic system is to self-cultivate outputs which maximize the likelihood of additional inputs—the stimulation of feedback mechanisms is the stimulation of network activity. Thus, positive feedback must play some role in the propagation and

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<sup>32</sup> Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 96.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that feedback systems were not altogether new technological expressions. They also play a role in mechanical and in industrial processes. However, these systems involve force/energy feedback rather than informational feedback. See Konrad Wachsmann's description: "Energy is controlled in circuits, which, by means of complicated feedback techniques, automatically establish a dynamic balance between task and performance," in Konrad Wachsmann, "The Influence of Industrialization," in *The Turning Point of Building: Structure and Design* (New York: Reinhold, 1961), 53.

<sup>34</sup> See John H. Milsum, ed., *Positive Feedback* (London: Pergamon Press, 1968). See also Donald L. DeAngelis, Wilfred M. Post, and Curtis C. Travis, *Positive Feedback in Natural Systems* (Berlin; New York; Tokyo: Springer-Verlag, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence S. Bale, "Gregory Bateson, Cybernetics, and the Social/Behavioral Sciences," *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 3, no. 1 (1995), 15.

reproduction of digital networks and the self-'authentic' subjectivities typically reproduced through them.

A fairly simple example of positive feedback activity is Facebook's general model for the generation of network content. While users are signed in to the network, their searching inquiries and browsing activities across the Web are recorded and symbolically codified by the network as event-inputs. The network, in turn, (among other things) automatically integrates this information to self-alter/self-modify its specific output program for a user, thereby changing the type of content which appears on that user's feed, adjusting it in an effort to optimize the loop (to stimulate greater accumulation of user activity).<sup>36</sup> Like most contemporary networks, Facebook's system also integrates more subliminal collection techniques such as recording IP addresses and geographical locations.<sup>37</sup>

The second form of feedback in cybernetic theory does not involve the type of input signals which allow a system to self-modify current operations, but rather it involves the types of signals which affirm/confirm that the course/program is optimally functional and functionally optimal. Thus, negative feedback functions to stabilize the system. According

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<sup>36</sup> Regarding the topic of self-modification in relation to the concept of emergent systems/networks, see Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> See Brendan Van Alsenoy et al., "From Social Media Service to Advertising Network: A Critical Analysis of Facebook's Revised Policies and Terms, Draft v1.2" (Vrije Universiteit Brussel; Belgian Privacy Commission, March 31, 2015), <http://www.law.kuleuven.be/citip/en/news/item/facebooks-revised-policies-and-terms-v1-2.pdf>. By default, Facebook's mobile applications gain full permissions access to a phone's microphone. Facebook officially denies that it records and codifies ambient audio data for the purposes of targeted advertising (or any other uses). However, the fact remains that the network has access to ambient audio, but because its operations take place in proprietary corporate secrecy, one is limited to speculate about this particular black box of cybernetic operations. See Ryan Tate, "Why Facebook Spent a Year Learning to Listen in on Your TV Shows," *Wired*, May 22, 2014, <http://www.wired.com/2014/05/facebooks-year-tv/>.

to Lawrence Bale, negative feedback signals determine “that no change in the system's output is necessary. Thus, [...] allowing it to remain steady or constant within its prevailing course of trajectory.”<sup>38</sup> In the example of Facebook's network model, negative feedback is the type of user input which affirms to the system that the orientation and organization of content provided by the system's operations are working, and attracting the gaze of its users, or provoking sufficient growth/activity. Following Wiener's general theory of cybernetics, this feedback system forms a means of maintaining orderliness and social control, or staving off disorganization by achieving a systemic stasis of optimal organization.<sup>39</sup>

But the system is never entirely perfect, and the stasis is never solidified and rendered permanent—there always remains the possibility of disruption, dis/order, infection, or “noise.”<sup>40</sup> While the combination of positive and negative feedback may serve to regulate, reproduce, transform, and stabilize a given individual system such as Facebook, I would wager that it also engenders a degree of instability of what might be conceptualized as the global meta-system. In other words, the functional operations of a cybernetic feedback loop not only involve the self-corrective and self-stabilizing behaviors of a system's circuits, but they also involve a profound mechanics of accumulation which, more broadly, leads to radical instability in global systemic social processes. Negative

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<sup>38</sup> Bale, “Gregory Bateson, Cybernetics, and the Social/Behavioral Sciences,” 15.

<sup>39</sup> See Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 10-11. See also Stephen Pfohl, “The Cybernetic Delirium of Norbert Wiener,” *CTheory*, January 30, 1997, [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=86](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=86). Lastly, regarding a historical overview of these ideas of stasis-preserving/reproducing cybernetics (and the funding of their research) after World War II, see Donna J. Haraway, “The High Cost of Information in Post-World War II Evolutionary Biology: Ergonomics, Semiotics, and the Sociobiology of Communication Systems,” *The Philosophical Forum* XIII, no. 2–3 (Winter-Spring, 1981-82): 244–278.

<sup>40</sup> To some extent, Jussi Parikka explores this notion a discussion of computer viruses as a form of cybernetic “noise” in Jussi Parikka, “Viral Noise and the (Dis)Order of the Digital Culture,” *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 7, no. 6 (2005).

feedback stabilizes the operations of a given system insofar as the reproduction of input is optimal and its output is maximal. But what about the broader global effects of the output accumulation of multiple systems? The cybernetic language of techno-scientific efficiency is hitherto most likely unequipped to engage this crucial question of our digitized and globalized world. The recursive effects of cyclical feedback processes, or the multiplications of informational signification which they affect/effect (as well as the material production and consumption which they may less directly affect/effect through advertising, for example), over-accumulate, proliferate, and thoroughly saturate communicative media. The sum of these mediatic effects—symptoms of hyper-efficient feedback systems—are part and parcel of a kind of overproduction and cultural implosion: the great instability of a global cybernetic system. Marshall McLuhan opens his *Understanding Media* with the famous diagnosis: "After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding."<sup>41</sup> What better describes "digital culture," if not this implosivity, and also, the virulent cybernetic processes of informational accumulation by which it comes about?

#### **4. The Hyperreal Accumulation of Information**

It may be useful to take a step back from this discussion about informational accumulation and implosion (which will be elaborated in subsequent chapters) in order to examine in greater detail what is meant by the term 'information'. Beyond its everyday usage/colloquial vernacular, the development of cybernetics and cybernetic theory has no doubt been intimately linked to theories of information. While limitations of space and scope herein prevent the development of a comprehensive overview of information theory

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<sup>41</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 3.

vis-à-vis cybernetics, it may be useful to focus on one particular early foundational understanding: namely, Gregory Bateson's 1970 definition of information as part of his general theory of cybernetics. Bateson argues: "what we mean by information—the elementary unit of information—is *a difference which makes a difference*, and it is able to make a difference because the neural pathways along which it travels and is continually transformed are themselves provided with energy."<sup>42</sup> Given this definition, one might infer that the re/production of information is a purely negative enterprise.<sup>43</sup> The constitution of information ultimately has little to do with any positive reference to empirical materiality, but rather takes place according to a logic of differentials within a self-contained simulatory computational system. Change in/of the system is not generated according to a *representational* reflection of the non-virtual, 'real world', but according to differences measured between the inter-referential values contained within the system itself. Thus, Bateson argues that unlike in the hard sciences, where material "effects" can be linked to "concrete conditions or events—impacts, forces, and so forth," effects in the world of information are brought about by computational value differences, which are inherently abstract and belong to the epistemological domain of the mind.<sup>44</sup> Information circulates through matter as a medium that has a materiality and a physicality, whether it is the flesh of the human nervous system or the silicon of a CPU. But information is otherwise an immaterial expression of abstract energy, according to Bateson's theory of information cybernetics.

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<sup>42</sup> Gregory Bateson, "Form, Substance, and Difference," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Northvale, N.J: Aronson, 1987), 321.

<sup>43</sup> Although, to be clear, negativity in this sense means something much different from the meaning of negativity in 'negative feedback' phenomena.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

To clarify what he means by difference, Bateson uses the example of cartography: "We know the territory does not get onto the map. [...] What gets onto the map, in fact, is *difference*, be it a difference in altitude, a difference in vegetation, a difference in population structure, difference in surface, or what-ever."<sup>45</sup> The content of the map, then, is a kind of self-contained amalgam of inter-relational differences. If one extends this basic principle of difference in the map example to more advanced digital computational models—such as a medical simulation of an organism's anatomy, a visualization of a microbiological structure<sup>46</sup>, or a deep learning "artificial neural network" search engine<sup>47</sup>—then, unlike a traditional analog map, where the contents are generally assumed to have a firm representational relation to the world, digitized information can be designed/programmed to autonomously change, adapt, 'learn', and re/produce new informational contents through the types of feedback chains outlined above.

I propose the following preliminary hypothesis on the reproductive operations of information via contemporary digital technologies: Information (difference that reproduces difference) is the abstracted content that, although it was perhaps once rooted in some representational function (such as cartography), becomes detached from the 'real world'. This detachment happens as a cumulative result of the central capability of digitized information to autonomously reproduce and transform other information, and to generate various kinds of mediatic effects independent of the representational function, as well as independent of intelligible/determinable physical causality. The question of whether the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> For example, see Biophysical Society, "'Virtual Virus' Unfolds the Flu on a CPU," *Science Daily*, February 8, 2015, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/02/150208152758.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> See Jürgen Schmidhuber, "Deep Learning in Neural Networks: An Overview," Technical Report (Manno-Lugano, Switzerland: Istituto Dalle Molle di Studi sull'Intelligenza Artificiale; University of Lugano, October 2014), <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1404.7828.pdf>.

self-contained/self-adaptive digital system corresponds representationally to the analog world has nothing to do with the internal, self-referential coherence of operations and intelligibility of informational circuits. But what happens if informational feedback processes proliferate/accumulate to a point at which the 'real world' is no longer conceivable as anything other than information? The real itself becomes reduced to self-contained differences producing other differences across a vast global circuitry.

Bateson's cartography example describing the state and constitution of information is oddly reminiscent of Baudrillard's in/famous inversion of commonsense epistemology, in which he claims that the map is no longer the representation of a preexisting 'real' territory/geography, but rather: "Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory."<sup>48</sup> Baudrillard suggests that the Borges fable, "where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory (but where the decline of the Empire sees this map become frayed and finally ruined)," is today most appropriately inverted.<sup>49</sup> He writes:

Abstraction today is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—**PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA**—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there [...].<sup>50</sup>

The "hyperreal" here describes the technological autonomy of information in a reality which, throughout modernity, has been ceaselessly represented, recorded, remodeled, and virtualized according to an "orgy of realism" and deep productivist bias of the west. In this "orgy," Baudrillard writes: "everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible,

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<sup>48</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded."<sup>51</sup> According to Baudrillard, the ceaselessness of accumulating representationality of reality has effectively overwhelmed the real as we know it, cultivating a vertiginous situation in which the real, having been saturated by its own signification, disappears beneath/into its own excess and proliferation. The hyperreal describes the outcome of this general disappearance/proliferation, whereby the real has been displaced<sup>52</sup> by that which is "more real than the real."<sup>53</sup> For Baudrillard, "It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality, just as the excess of information puts an end to information [...]."<sup>54</sup>

*'Digital culture' articulates the dominant cultural expression of this excess, of hyperreality. And, perhaps, digitality is its "metaphysical principle."<sup>55</sup> It is a post-culture: a non-place where the map precedes the territory and the simulation precedes the original or, at least, overwhelms it entirely.<sup>56</sup>*

If any of this seems absurd, empirically backwards, or demonstrably false, consider the fact that as of 2009, social media users of a virally popular agriculture simulation game

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<sup>51</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), 34–35.

<sup>52</sup> Or, Baudrillard sometimes articulates a stronger claim that the real has been "murdered." See Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 1996). See also "The Murder of the Real" in Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 61-83.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 99.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>55</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 103.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of GPS, geotagging technologies, and digital cartography, see Herlander Elias, *Post-Web: The Continuous Geography of Digital Media* (Lisbon, Portugal: Formal Press Publishing House, 2012), 107-117.

called "FarmVille" outnumbered actual farmers in the U.S. over sixty-to-one.<sup>57</sup> The simulacrum engulfs the real. The deceased yester-centuries of an agriculture-based economy proliferate in sign, in binary code, in compressed form. The great Neolithic Revolution—particularly, the modern mythology of the human ascent to civilization from a state of nature—returns to the postindustrial world in the form of parody: the obsessive/excessive time-waste of a so-called 'cognitive labor', service-based economy.<sup>58</sup> The subject-users of "FarmVille"—those hollowed out Sisyphean Web 2.0 'laborers'—farm only amalgams of pixels: simulacra. And they do so without compensation or reward!<sup>59</sup> There are literally no fruits reaped from this masturbatory expression of hyperreal excess—except, perhaps, the player's occasional dopaminergic reward: a neurochemical response triggered by gameplay progression/achievement, through which s/he becomes cybernetically disciplined to return to the game and repeat virtualized reward-seeking behaviors.<sup>60</sup> The operations of the FarmVille collective are symptomatic of a broader productivist system which hijacks the neural activities of subjects as operational functions of the re/generation, re/production, and overaccumulation of information *ad absurdum*.

Digitality is as much an effect of informational proliferation/accumulation as it is a provocateur. I argue that digital information technologies historically emerge, in part, as

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<sup>57</sup> Douglas Quenqua, "To Harvest Squash, Click Here," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2009, sec. Fashion & Style, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/fashion/29farmville.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/fashion/29farmville.html?_r=0).

<sup>58</sup> Regarding the topic of cognitive labor, see its broad development throughout Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> See also the more recent "Job Simulator" virtual reality title: Dean Takahashi, "Hands on with Owlchemy's Silly Job Simulator Virtual Reality Game for the HTC Vive," *VentureBeat*, January 31, 2016, <http://venturebeat.com/2016/01/31/hands-on-with-owlchemys-silly-job-simulator-virtual-reality-game-for-the-htc-vive/>.

<sup>60</sup> See M.J. Koeppe et al., "Evidence for Striatal Dopamine Release during a Video Game," *Nature* 393, no. 6682 (May 21, 1998): 266–268. See also McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

rational and instrumental administrative technologies used to manage the general effects, and more particularly, the material and linguistic excesses of (capitalist) overaccumulation. Thus, the strategy of these now-implosive technologies is one of compression, which is resultant of the generalized crisis of accumulation.<sup>61</sup> The implosive result marks the end of an age of promethean expansion, and of the western explosion of culture and mechanical technology characteristic of the pre-digital industrial revolution. Well before the advent of the Internet and digital media as they are most commonly (mis)understood today, McLuhan saw an important element of implosivity and compression emerging in electronic mass media technologies: "After three thousand years of specialist explosion and of increasing specialism and alienation in the technological extensions of our bodies, our world has become **compressional** by dramatic reversal."<sup>62</sup> Relating to implosivity, I theorize digital culture around two central problematics: 1) this compressive and implosive reversal (albeit in a much more violent and virulent form than the one envisaged by McLuhan<sup>63</sup>); and also, 2) the idea of a highly productive and

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<sup>61</sup> This, perhaps, is an outgrowth of Karl Marx's broad development capital accumulation found throughout the following: Marx's notion of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The *Grundrisse*," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 221–293. See also Karl Marx, "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," in *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin Classics, 1992), 762–870. Lastly, for his more detailed development, see also Karl Marx, "Part Three: The Law of the Tendential Fall in the Rate of Profit," in *Capital: Volume 3: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 314–375.

<sup>62</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 5. [My emphasis].

<sup>63</sup> Particularly, the 'violent and virulent' form of implosion to which I refer is much more closely aligned with Baudrillard's conception. This conception was developed throughout his entire corpus, however, one may find a comparison between McLuhan's optimistic vision and Baudrillard's more pessimistic one in Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in Media," trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History*, On Writing Histories of Literature, 16, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 577–589. See also Jean Baudrillard, "The Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence," trans. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, *October* 20 (1982): 3–13. Lastly, regarding this topic of comparing Baudrillard and McLuhan on implosion, see also Gary Genosko, *McLuhan and Baudrillard: The Masters of Implosion* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999).

fundamental void at its center: a virtual/virtualizing emptiness, against which its representational contents are overproduced, its subjects are over-signified, and information proliferates to implosive extremes.

## **5. Modernity, Media Reproduction, and the Decadence/Disenchantment of Digital Culture:**

### **Theorizing Virulent Digitality through the (Post)Metaphysical**

The media analyses of digital culture and implosive digital reproduction in this dissertation take a multidisciplinary approach. They do not exclusively concern the domains of cybernetics and cultural/political epistemology, but additionally (and specifically, in regards to the latter of the two above problematics) the following analyses reflect a deep concern for questions arising out of philosophy and metaphysics. My development of various reproductive operations and configurations of digital culture are metaphysical insofar as the “fundamental question of metaphysics,” as Heidegger claimed, is the question posed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz just over three hundred years ago: “‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ For nothing is simpler and easier than something.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps, however, the simplicity of nothing/ness is precisely the lure which continually demands the production, presence, and appearance of something/ness: a kind of fundamental void which seduces the world into being. Baudrillard articulates this primacy of nothing over something by inverting Leibniz’s question:

Today, the real question is: ‘Why is there nothing rather than something?’

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<sup>64</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason, 1714,” in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker, vol. 2 (Dordrecht, Holland; Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 639. It should be noted, however, that Heidegger formats the question ontologically, posing it more explicitly in terms of being and beings: “The question ‘Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?’ is first in rank for us as the broadest, as the deepest, and finally as the most originary question.” Martin Heidegger, “The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics,” in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 2.

The absence of things from themselves, the fact that they do not take place though they appear to do so, the fact that everything withdraws behind its own appearance and is, therefore, never identical with itself, is the material illusion of the world. And, deep down, this remains the great riddle, the enigma which fills us with dread and from which we protect ourselves with the formal illusion of truth.

On pain of dread, we have to decipher the world and therefore wipe out the initial illusoriness of the world. We can bear neither the void, nor the secret, nor pure appearance. And why should we decipher it instead of letting its illusion shine out as such, in all its glory? [...]

What we have forgotten in modernity, by dint of constantly accumulating, adding, going for more, is that force comes from subtraction, power from absence. Because we are no longer capable today of coping with the symbolic mastery of absence, we are immersed in the opposite illusion, the disenchanting illusion of the proliferation of screens and images.<sup>65</sup>

By inquiring into the mechanics, effects, and implications of the re/production of information in digital culture—particularly, in terms of its overproduction of ‘something’ out of an ontological ‘nothing’, but also precisely the inverse—many of the analyses, critiques, reflections, and explorations in the following chapters are concerned with the fate (and supposed disappearance/end) of western metaphysics.<sup>66</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation’s philosophical considerations, then, the term “digital culture” also denotes a (post)metaphysical approach to thinking about cybernetics, information, and the current techno-formation of globalized western culture’s absent ontological center.<sup>67</sup>

This absence in/of the digital also describes the latest techno-historical outgrowth of the kind of cultural decadence to which Friedrich Nietzsche refers in terms of the disappearance of myth:

Let us think of a culture that has no fixed and sacred primordial site but is doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures—there we have the present age, the result of that Socratism which is bent on the destruction of myth. And

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<sup>65</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 2-3.

<sup>66</sup> See Martin Heidegger’s proclamation that “Nietzsche’s philosophy is the end of metaphysics” in Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, in *Nietzsche, Volumes I and II*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 199.

<sup>67</sup> Theorizing the digital in the context of metaphysics is not unheard of. Other than Baudrillard, for example, Alexander Galloway’s recent book on the digital does precisely this. He develops the digital in terms of the philosophy of Laruelle, Deleuze, and explicitly ‘dialectical metaphysics.’ See Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

now the mythless man stands hungry [...]. The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, [...] the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb? Let us ask ourselves whether the feverish and uncanny excitement of this culture is anything but the greedy seizing and snatching at food of a hungry man—[...] a culture that cannot be satisfied no matter how much it devours [...].<sup>68</sup>

Nietzsche's imagery describes a profound disenchantment/disillusionment of modernity.

The emptiness of western culture he postulates describes a nihilistic culture which is starved for meaning, but which demands to be fed by the very hands of nihilism (in the form of modern positivist epistemologies). Similarly, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of Enlightenment describes a world in which myth and magic have disappeared, in a sense, and have been displaced/relegated/reappropriated by hyper-rational instrumentalization. They write: "the whole ambiguous profusion of mythical demons was intellectualized to become the pure form of ontological entities. Even the patriarchal gods of Olympus were finally assimilated by the philosophical *logos* [...]."<sup>69</sup> Thus, the linguistic irreducibility and the mythical irreconcilability of life and death, for instance, are forcefully reduced to signs of ancient, historicized ontological personifications: Eros and Thanatos. In the digital, the *dæmon* of ancient Greek mythology has been hollowed out, reduced to its mere sign, and reassigned as a computer science term for the dormant processes/programs which run in the background of an operating system: "from the mythological meaning, later rationalized as the acronym '**Disk And Execution MONitor**'. "<sup>70</sup> And historically prior to this, in the sciences, the *dæmon* had

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<sup>68</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy in The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (NY: Vintage Books, 1967), 135-136.

<sup>69</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Eric S. Raymond, "Daemon," in "The On-Line Hacker Jargon File, Version 4.3.1," June 29, 2001, <http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon>, 128. [Emphasis added].

already been appropriated by the field of physics in the form of "Maxwell's demon," a thought experiment which tried to disprove the Second Law of Thermodynamics.<sup>71</sup> In both cases, the *dæmon* loses all mythical and metaphysical depth. It becomes hyper-positivized. Myth is exterminated from (post)modern digital culture, yet its empty signs continue to proliferate throughout its void.

Lamenting myth, Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as Nietzsche, seem to speak to a general existential and cultural effect, or a series of effects, related to what Max Weber articulates as the "disenchantment of the world." In a way, this is a precursor to the digital world which Baudrillard refers to as the "disenchanted illusion of the proliferation of screens and images."<sup>72</sup> Weber writes:

the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or the conviction that if *only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means **the disenchantment of the world**. Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends.<sup>73</sup>

For Weber, The "intellectualization," "rationalization," and scientificity which engulfed the world during the Enlightenment age, then, bears little resemblance to what pre-modern societies seem to have likely experienced as the mystery and mythos of the world. Such a world was secularized and, in effect, extinguished by a proliferation of positivity, facts, and truths. For Weber, however, it is not our actually-existing knowledge of the real that renders obsolete the possibility of its mystical encounter, but rather it is the result of

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<sup>71</sup> See Charles H. Bennett, "Demons, Engines and the Second Law," *Scientific American*, 1987.

<sup>72</sup> Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 12-13. [Emphasis added].

historically-specific discursive rule formations which govern what kind of knowledge is considered legitimate.<sup>74</sup> The profound disenchantment of modernity starts with the naturalization and discursive reproduction of a kind of widespread ideology, the implicit principle of which supposes that, with enough intelligence, training, and effort, the truth of the world (and, perhaps, reality as such) can be exposed through calculative rationality. This positivistic view of the world reifies (and thus, in a sense, also reproduces the contours of) a singular reality. Human reality takes the appearance, paradoxically, of the inhuman—the hypothetical composite of a total and complete accumulation of indifferent facts. In a recent polemical piece in *Wired*, comically titled “Neil deGrasse Tyson is a Black Hole, Sucking the Fun Out of the Universe,” Sam Kriss brings the spirit of this general critique of modern disenchantment to a more contemporary context. He argues that the type of fact-fetishizing pop-science, which is typified by Tyson, ultimately leads to a grey and dull universe: “in this sick parody of a universe it's all been twisted into something hollow, meaningless, and mercilessly dull. [...] a seeping flood of grey goo, paring down the world to its driest, dullest, most colourless essentials. [...] But all this is pedantry, the perverse insistence on how the world is, the *total apathy to how it could be different*.”<sup>75</sup> This generally disenchanted situation of modern life—whereby dogmatic positivism has rendered reality but a reified parody of itself, as an amalgamation of virulently accumulated facts and their assumed self-sufficiency—succinctly describes an early

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<sup>74</sup> Regarding the development of a theory of such discursive formations/configurations, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). For an example of more contemporary analysis, particularly relating to the field of discursive governance, see also Patricia Mooney Nickel, *Public Sociology and Civil Society: Governance, Politics, and Power* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).

<sup>75</sup> Sam Kriss, “Neil deGrasse Tyson Is a Black Hole, Sucking the Fun Out of the Universe,” *Wired*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.wired.com/2016/04/neil-degrasse-tyson-black-hole-sucking-fun-universe/>. [Emphasis added].

precondition of cybernetic domination through systematized feedback and informationalization/virtualization: namely, a fundamental emptiness on the level of culture, which first hemorrhaged thanks to instrumental reason<sup>76</sup>, and has since ruthlessly and insatiably demanded to be restocked, restored, reconceived, and re-inoculated with meaning.

Disenchantment virulently spreads throughout modernity. Perhaps it is a precursor to the contemporary predominant 'viral' form of media: the digital modality of hyper-intensified/hyperreal propagation of information, which is endemic to contemporary digital culture. Nietzsche metaphorically describes the decadence of this condition in terms of the opening of a void which has engendered the figure of an "eternally hungry" man, desperate for meaning and relief from desire. The eternally hungry man, who grasps for some shred of relief from his disenchantment, reflects a broader culture which lacks a center, an identity, and thus, begins to "nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures."<sup>77</sup>

This generalized situation in which the death of a culture has led to parasitism is a precursory element of what Baudrillard later describes as "the violence of the global." In an essay by this title, Baudrillard claims that the values of universality in western modernity have, in effect, led to its cultural demise: "Any culture that becomes universal loses its singularity and dies."<sup>78</sup> He argues that, through global-wide networks, a proliferation of the exchange of everything from money, to language and meaning<sup>79</sup>, has resulted in a radical disappearance of western culture. The domain of the global, in effect, supplants that of the

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<sup>76</sup> See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 136.

<sup>78</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, May 20, 2003, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>.

<sup>79</sup> See also Greg Urban, *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

universal. Baudrillard writes: "Culturally, globalization gives way to a promiscuity of signs and values, to a form of pornography in fact. Indeed, the global spread of everything and nothing through networks is pornographic. No need for sexual obscenity anymore. All you have is a global interactive copulation."<sup>80</sup> Simultaneously, processes of globalization systematically homogenize and fragment the world.<sup>81</sup> What is left in place of the universal values of the Enlightenment Age, and after the violent effects of their global deployment, Baudrillard claims, is "an omnipotent techno-structure," which "has been left alone to dominate" our contemporary "virtual global culture."<sup>82</sup> Baudrillard later refers to the violence of globalization as "a global virulence." He continues: "This form of violence is indeed viral. It moves by contagion, proceeds by chain reaction, and little by little it destroys our immune systems and our capacities to resist."<sup>83</sup> What Baudrillard describes sounds much like a global amalgamation of cybernetic feedback systems.

Indeed, virulence is the dominating technological modality of contemporary digital culture. This is so much the case that it has received a common parlance in reference to the contemporary production and dissemination of information: "viral media." Virulence is the conceptual center of this dissertation, and shapes its theoretical framework. I argue that a principle of virulence works beneath the re/productive processes of cybernetic feedback and/in digital culture. The accumulation of feedback outputs of cybernetic machine systems takes place by means of a virulent and hyper-efficient modality of digital re/production. Moreover, this modality engenders, as I suggested, a violent global

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<sup>80</sup> Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global."

<sup>81</sup> Regarding this question of dual homogenization-fragmentation, but formulated in terms of a dialectics of "totalitarianism and heterogeneity," see Simon Cooper, *Technoculture and Critical Theory: In the Service of the Machine?* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 88-96.

<sup>82</sup> Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global."

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

instability. The global domination of “an omnipotent techno-structure,” in Baudrillard’s words, is precisely this cybernetic violence: an uncanny form of governance in digital culture. It is no coincidence, then, that the term ‘governor’ and the term ‘cybernetics’, as Wiener reminds us, share an etymological background. Each is derived from the Greek *κυβερνήτης* (*kybernetes*), which roughly means *steersman*.<sup>84</sup> Virulence not only defines the contemporary contours of our digital culture, but it also shapes the technological meta-structure by which human subjects are cybernetically governed (algorithmically administered/controlled).<sup>85</sup> A concern with virulence is, unequivocally, also a concern with being-governed, and thus, it reflects a concern with the political.<sup>86</sup>

In the following section, I conclude this chapter by giving an overview of the dissertation, and by outlining the approach, structure, and organization of its analyses of digital culture, virulent (re)production, digital subjectivity, and cybernetic governance/control/domination.

## **6. Approach, Structure, Organization**

This dissertation is organized according to a threefold topical and conceptual division: Digitality, Virulence, and Cybernetic Virtualization. Part one, “Digitality” (under which the current chapter falls), is predominantly concerned with theoretically interrogating the category of “the digital” as a prominent term in the contemporary cultural

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<sup>84</sup> Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 11. Wiener also notes that “the steering engines of a ship are indeed one of the earliest and best-developed forms of feedback mechanisms.” Ibid., 12.

<sup>85</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (January 1, 1992): 3–7. For a more contemporary discussion which updates and extends Deleuze’s theorization of the control society to the current “apparatuses of informatic control” in digital cybernetics, see also Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 168.

<sup>86</sup> Regarding the category of politics vs. the category of ‘the political’, and the role of governance in the latter, see Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 577; 598; 601–606.

and technological lexicon, as well as a representational modality of contemporary forms of re/production. The goal of this first division is to introduce some central ideas of the dissertation, as well as to begin laying its theoretical and methodological foundations. It critically and analytically explores some of the possible epistemological formations and systematizations, emergent ontologies, forms of governance and regulation, mechanisms of social/cultural control, political imaginaries, discursive formations, inter-subjective/inter-objective mediated relations, network ecologies, everyday technological practices, and technical/technological mechanisms which characterize the logics of digital re/production.

The second chapter on digitality, "Disappearance and Proliferation: A Baudrillardian Approach to Media and Digital Culture," develops detailed theoretical and methodological bearings for the entire project. Thus, like the current chapter, it serves as a kind of umbrella of reference for subsequent chapters. Its central focus is an examination of the linguistic and epistemological legacy of western representation. I critically elaborate a generalized understanding of representationality/referentiality and its central logics, and theorize the functional importance of the concept of representation in various operations of hyper-production/hyper-signification in the contemporary era of digital communication. This chapter examines a broad range of Baudrillard's work and, more particularly, it examines his contributions to a critique of representation and a theory of digitality, hyperreality, and simulation. The chapter establishes the dissertation's own intellectual and philosophical debt to Baudrillard, but it also speaks to a broader theoretical heritage by simultaneously situating and disarranging Baudrillard's oeuvre within and against conversations engaged by Frankfurt School critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodern thought. Finally, I

argue that there is a way to read Baudrillard, in the context of his philosophical commitments and transgressions, such that one may see a kind of theoretical opening for what I refer to as a "critical digital methodology." Baudrillard's conceptual universe is one in which the will to represent reality has ultimately led to its disappearance, but also to a wild and viral proliferation. I argue that Baudrillard's general theory of dual disappearance-proliferation provides a conceptually rich and fertile ground for the development of a symptomological approach to the analysis of virulence in/as digital culture.

The second division contains three chapters relating to the concept of virulence. Each chapter applies and continues development of the symptomological Baudrillardian approach. Virulence, I argue, is an amorphous and radically uncertain concept, which pertains to an equally erratic series of techno-cultural forces, effects, and phenomena within the global productivist manifold. Through analysis of a shared set of symptoms, each chapter of part two allows a basic logic of virulence to unfold, emanating outward as textual signification from within its respective conceptual field: visibility (image), language (sign), and sexuality (porn). In each of these domains, virulence describes a general tendency shared by technological objects, media contents, and linguistic/visual effects to self-propagate throughout various systems, or to accumulate/assemble/grow/develop into technological systems themselves. This tendency runs parallel to that of the virus, or viral contagion, and is thus also a metaphor for the intensity of its reproduction, disruptive force, and general destabilizing effects. The whole of part two points towards the hyper-intensified self-propagation of digital networks and cybernetic systems which, broadly speaking, function according to a self-referential and semi-autonomous logic of virulence. Through hyper-mobile, hyper-networked digital technologies, self-propagating viral

proliferation of information occurs relatively untethered from any mechanism of moderation, repression, control, governance, or externally imposed/enforced limitation. Thus, I develop virulence as a necessarily unfinished<sup>87</sup> conceptual framework designed to interpret the world of systematized and virtualized subjects and objects, as well as those operations occurring between them which blur their distinction. In short, virulence is developed here as a theoretical principle of productive and accumulative force, which is central, I argue, to the formation of cybernetic systems.

Chapter three, "Viral Visuality: The Global Proliferation of Social Media," focuses predominantly on the network virality of various digital ecologies and social/cultural systems of reproduction. It takes a kind of sociological inventory of several technological, cultural, and historical symptoms, as well as mediatic effects of the technological hegemony of "ocularcentricity,"<sup>88</sup> or the centrality of representational viscosity in the western world. This hegemony is rooted in a collective radical demand/value for reference and representation and, also, in a deep-seated will to access the so-called 'authentic' real. Hyper-activated by the unprecedented efficiency of digital compression and contemporary technologies of communication, the demands of representation take a virulent form which, indifferent to any particular media content, nevertheless sees to its overaccumulation, or the total media saturation of representational information to the point of global implosion. In this peculiar way, perhaps, a principle of virulence loosely (yet systematically) regulates

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<sup>87</sup> This framework necessarily remains unfinished because the structure (or structurelessness) of virulence is such that it is never entirely complete. Put differently, what makes virulence virulent comes not from a structure at all, but rather from a perpetual lack of structure, hence the productivist impetus for its actualization of network/technical/cultural/social structures.

<sup>88</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

processes involved in the production, consumption, and dissemination/circulation of social media. Specifically, I examine, describe, and analyze implosive mediatic processes which are seemingly dependent on digitized circuits of everyday quotidian inter-subjective communication, such as the algorithmic (re)production of (social) information on Facebook. One such process, I argue, involves the digital manufacturing and manipulation of signs relating to the problem of alienation and its resolution, or the desire for social connectivity. Thus, the chapter develops a preliminary critique of social, technological, and existential alienation as a political problematic. I argue that criticism of a digital network like Facebook on the grounds that it is an alienatory technology is entirely futile. Facebook operates and self-propagates, in part, by systematically reproducing the deficit which it also promises to alleviate. It succeeds by reproducing in its users a "malignant addiction," insofar as "it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes," as David Foster Wallace once wrote in reference to the cultural habits surrounding television.<sup>89</sup> In other words, Facebook engenders, through the digital hyper-mediation of its subject-users, a sense of alienation which, through the promise of connectivity, it conveniently also purports to resolve technologically. The strategy of alienation-connectivity constitutes an advanced, semi-automatic process of digital reproduction: a preprogrammed feedback loop which guarantees constant social signification, virulently propagates network activity, and provokes endless informational accumulation.

The next chapter, "The Virulent Function of Language: From Babel to Information," details virulence as an ever-present component of written and spoken language. I argue that representational language has a fundamentally virulent function, the operations of

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<sup>89</sup> David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 163.

which tend toward the exponential accumulation of linguistic signification and meaning. The "destiny" of language, I theorize, is its eternal reproduction and proliferation: a drive, perhaps, toward the abstract sum of its absolute accumulation, and the point of its total saturation and implosion. The chapter develops an explication of the predominant forms and functions taken by virulence as a principle of linguistic production, proliferation, and profusion. I argue that the virulence of language—and, indeed, the virulent mode of production which is present in most, if not all, digital systems that involve some kind of management/administration of sign circulation and stimulation/simulation of signification—is an outgrowth of its disappointed demand for referentiality. Through a broad survey of the philosophy of language, from Heidegger to Walter Benjamin and Ferdinand de Saussure, I argue that the inevitable (yet also contingent, hyper-variable, and, by no means, qualitatively pre/determined) outcome of the virulent function of all language is rooted, paradoxically, in language's own self-containment and lack of alterity. Most importantly, the chapter theorizes that information—as a material force, a social/cultural and ideological construct, and a technical form of the operations of technological systems—is largely rooted in the overaccumulation of language. Information emerges as a compressive means of managing the hyper-accumulative effects of economies of digital reproduction. Thus, I argue that the Internet constitutes a kind of systematic actualization of a concept that Benjamin referred to as the "*Überbenannt*," or the "overnamed."<sup>90</sup>

Similar to how chapter four theoretically develops the virulent function of language, as well as its operations and their subsequent effects, the fifth chapter, "Digital Economies of Exposure," focuses on the virulent function of sexuality. Parallel to the other two

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<sup>90</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 330.

chapters of this division, I argue that the virulence of sexuality is based, in large part, on the systematized reproduction of desire and its continual disappointment. Sex, like language, can be thought of as a kind of closed and self-referential system of productivist accumulation. Sexuality overaccumulates and virally proliferates in the form of linguistic and visual signification, as if it were trying to fill its own epistemic void. We are seduced by a 'will to know'<sup>91</sup>, to discover, and to comprehend sexuality's secret meaning; but the only secret of sexuality is that there is no secret.<sup>92</sup> The signs and images of sex penetrate all of reality in a desperate and technologically accelerated search for reference. Sex saturates even the most banal and asexual domains of digital culture in an effort to ground the meaning of human sexuality in some external real, or to verify its authenticity in the radical absence of a transcendental signifier.<sup>93</sup> Instances of digital "pornification"<sup>94</sup> of otherwise asexual media content such as "travel porn" and "food porn" are symptoms indicating a virulent production of sex. In the digital, as a result of the technical 'advancement' of representational/communicational networks, there occurs an explosive and complex orientational shift in production. Specifically, the production of pornography shifts from the localized porn industry of San Fernando Valley to the 'prosumer'<sup>95</sup> and amateur

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<sup>91</sup> See Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*.

<sup>92</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 90. See also Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 79-82.

<sup>93</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). For further elaboration/theoretical application of the concept, see also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>94</sup> I borrow this term from Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen, and Laura Saarenmaa, eds., *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007).

<sup>95</sup> For a discussion of media phenomena surrounding the term "prosumer," see Giovanni Cesareo, "From the 'Work of Consumption' to the 'Work of Prosumers': New Scenarios, Problems, and Risks," in *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa, Global Handbooks in Media and Communication Research (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 403–413.

production of pornography, which is radically delocalized in/by digital culture. In effect, this constitutes a shift from the domain of the porn industry to the domain of a "porn culture." Sexuality hereby enters into a type of (re)productive rhythm, which is essentially directed and choreographed by the virulent, systematizing chaos of a series digital feedback loops. I argue that, in porn culture, the reproduction of desire also takes place on the ideological (if not fetishistic) level of exposure. In porn culture, all media become pornographic in the sense that the total system shared by all representational media production is driven by a common ideological commitment to transparency or, perhaps, by a mediatically reproduced desire to expose (alongside the mediatically accelerated processes of subjectification/production of subjectivity via self-exposure technologies discussed above). This, I suggest, is also a radical ideological form taken by the productivist imperative to perform and produce constantly. Everything must be produced according to the ideological litmus tests of exposure and the dogmatic ideals of total visibility/transparency. All must be obsessively rendered real, true, and authentic according to digital culture's (hyper)realist compulsions toward the supposed reality of appearances.

The final division of this dissertation comprises a single chapter concerning the topic of cybernetic processes of virtualization: "Cybernetic Economies of Digital Productivism: Subjectivity and the Technologies of Virtualization." The overarching concern of part three comes from a commitment to practically, philosophically, and politically interrogate the characteristic roles, functions, and tendencies of relations between virtualized subjects and objects, broadly defined. I argue that, following Benjamin's understanding, these virtualized relations constitute a kind of fascist

configuration. In this critique/analysis, I utilize Baudrillard's early theory of "gestural systems,"<sup>96</sup> which details technologically and historically specific relational systems, by which a subject physically activates, engages with, or functionally aids the operations of a given system of technical/technological objects. Thus, a central theoretical contribution made by this chapter, and an important facet of the 'meta-theoretical' work done by this dissertation, is the reimagination and extension of Baudrillard's early work in consideration of his later insights (and also vice versa, but to a lesser extent). Extending Baudrillard's theory beyond his development of two primary gestural systems—namely, the systems of effort and control—chapter six argues that, in the digital era, we ought to think about subject-object technological relations in terms of a gestural system of *cognition*. A conceptual framework of cognitive gesture becomes especially relevant because, increasingly, subjective interactions with/within semi-autonomous and self-propagating technological object-systems take place in the virtual domain, wherein subjects and objects alike are, in effect, virtualized. I argue that a framework of cognition is well-suited for the task of analyzing virtual relations because it speaks to a sense in which virtualization describes a process of absorption, or functional appropriation, whereby all subjective activity is uncannily always already found to have been subsumed by a system of (digital) production, unconsciously guided by the invisible and non-subjective 'will' of hyper-efficient machinic operations, and in service to the endless nihilistic and impulsive operations of a global cybernetic system. Finally, I describe this cybernetic system in terms of a global metastasization, and point toward the possibilities of its critique.

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<sup>96</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (Verso, 2006), 49-54.

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## Chapter Two

### Disappearance and Proliferation: A Baudrillardian Approach to Media and Digital Culture

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Things are going to slide, slide in all directions,  
Won't be nothing,  
Nothing you can measure anymore. [...]  
There'll be the breaking of the ancient western code,  
There'll be phantoms,  
There'll be fires on the road.

-Leonard Cohen<sup>1</sup>

The need to speak, even if one has nothing to say, becomes more pressing when one has nothing to say, just as the will to live becomes more urgent when life has lost its meaning.

-Jean Baudrillard<sup>2</sup>

#### **1. Situating Baudrillard: Critical Theory, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism**

Baudrillard is an enigmatic figure. Throughout the wide range of his theoretical contributions, he seems to resist most (if not all) categorizations and designations of particular disciplines, fields, methodologies, and philosophical dispositions. However, I believe it is possible to situate him within (and transgressing out of) a few different domains of continental thought. In this chapter, I attempt to broadly contextualize the thinker in terms of three primary traditions: critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. I do not intend to construct a Baudrillard that fits entirely into any one or more of these categories, nor do I intend to deconstruct the delimitations of these

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, *The Future*, LP (Columbia, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (NY: Semiotext(e), 1988), 30.

categories vis-à-vis Baudrillard's works (although I think a certain degree of deconstruction is entailed in the task at hand). Rather, this analysis is arranged topically by way of five primary theoretical domains, each of which have some bearing on this project's methodological approach to thinking about virulence as a central characteristic of digital culture and a functional/operational principle of the networked technologies which run beneath it. These five domains are: *representation*, *principality*, *critique*, *ideology*, and *dialectics*. Having developed an outline of Baudrillard's thought regarding these domains within and against the abovementioned intellectual traditions, I argue and explore three central points: 1) After his formal break with Marxism, Baudrillard's work tends to seriously engage (and generally agree with) several pressing and important epistemological considerations and articulations of postmodern/poststructural thought.<sup>3</sup> I argue that Baudrillard recognizes and, to some extent, accepts the radical incommensurability of truth and meaning in the "postmodern condition," but his theories also transgress the philosophical defeatism which it seems to imply.<sup>4</sup> 2) Baudrillard is neither a dialectician nor a critical theorist. I suggest that Baudrillard's break with Marxist critical theory is unique, however, because it comes about not in the form of a negation (for that would be too dialectical), but rather a hyper-extension or hyper-intensification. In many ways, Baudrillard's thought can be read as a radicalization of critical theory, for better or worse. 3) Finally, and most importantly, I suggest that the interrelated logics of representation and simulation developed by Baudrillard may provide a kind of critical methodological opening for the study and analysis of media in/and digital culture. A

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<sup>3</sup> More specifically, I refer here to several epistemological considerations developed in the work of Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault in regards to language, culture, technology, politics, and sexuality.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

“Baudrillardian approach” to media analysis, I argue, constitutes a rich philosophical framework which needs to be seriously interrogated in terms of its heuristic strategies and political potentiality. Moreover, I argue that Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal—and more specifically, the mediatic mechanisms and effects relating to his conceptualization of disappearance and proliferation in the hyperreal condition—can be expanded to develop the contours of a symptomological approach to the epistemological analysis, philosophical reflection, and social/political/cultural critique of contemporary technological configurations of digital media.

At the outset, I should note the apparent difficulty involved in speaking about the three diverse philosophical fields evoked here. While critical theory is of course an equally complex and plural field, poststructuralism and postmodernism are particularly difficult to define. Firstly, the task is complicated by the notion that, unlike the tradition of critical theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism have no particular originary locus. While the latter two predominantly emerged in French intellectual thought in the second half of the twentieth century, there is no ‘Frankfurt School’ equivalent for geographically or institutionally locating their respective contributions. Secondly, because there is a general tendency within postmodernism/poststructuralism for thinkers to disassociate themselves from either domain, it is difficult to say who belongs to whom.<sup>5</sup> There is often a degree of overlap/ambiguity between the two categories, such as with Foucault and Derrida.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, the premodifier ‘post’ is a testament to the ambiguity of content—what

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Foucault’s disavowal of post-structuralism in Michel Foucault, “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 433-458.

<sup>6</sup> For an example in which Foucault is categorized as postmodernist, and Derrida as poststructuralist, see Ben Agger, “Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 105–131.

comes after modernity and what comes after structuralism are potentially subsumed into those respective bodies of thought. Unlike the Frankfurt School (to some extent), there is no common or general research direction associated with either postmodern or poststructural theory.

With these disclaimers in mind, rather than argue for a purity between the three traditions, or try to render Baudrillard but a footnote to three ideal modes of thought that do not actually exist, I will mostly speak about a survey of individual theorists, and with only vague references to the connotative traditions to which they are often thought to belong. What is more important here than achieving a positive understanding of what constitutes any of these traditions is to analyze the thinkers and philosophers often considered to be constitutive of them and, furthermore, to present the theoretical and methodological kinships and challenges that Baudrillard brings to the table. Lastly, critical theory will often serve as a backdrop or referent against which we can 'measure' and understand Baudrillard's theoretical departures. It is my position that critical theory—and more broadly, much of post/Marxist thought—sets many of the ideological and terminological stakes for the analysis of the five aforementioned topical domains.

Further complicating the task at hand, one may ask exactly which Baudrillard is it that I am speaking of? While it would be suspicious to claim that one could have any sort of comprehensive view or totalized understanding of the 'evolution' of his thought, or even that his transitional theoretical shifts align with some sort of organically connective causal movement, one thing ought to be clear: Baudrillard's work varied greatly throughout his lifetime, both in terms of writing style and his theoretical bearings (or lack thereof). Rather than submitting to the incommensurability of Baudrillard's self-contradictions (both within

any given text and between texts), I establish (through an admittedly limited mode of my own narrativity) a kind of general philosophical disposition and critical approach which I think is emergent throughout the course of his work. This approach is at times consistent, and other times at odds with the respective (post)foundational insights of critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism.

## **2. From Representation to Simulation: The Epistemology of Hyperreality**

At the outset, it may be useful to lay the foundation for some of Baudrillard's most important theoretical contributions. In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard outlines the transitional logic from a western epistemological order of 'representation' to that of what he calls "simulation" by describing four "successive phases of the image."<sup>7</sup> For all intents and purposes, for the moment we can understand 'image' to be more or less synonymous with the term 'sign'.<sup>8</sup> Each merely designates the operative term of representation. In the first phase or stage of the image, Baudrillard claims, the image or sign is thought to reflect a "basic reality." That is to say, when one represents some aspect of reality through the use of words or images, it can be assumed one does so accurately—the sign or image *re-presents* to others the originary objective presentation. The subject encounters an objective world and utilizes language in order to communicate some aspect/knowledge of it.

In this first stage, representation's primary epistemological function is to convey the object's truth through direct linguistic reflection. In the second stage, Baudrillard

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 11.

<sup>8</sup> The conceptual specificities denoted by 'image' and 'sign' are developed in chapters three and four, respectively.

claims, the image (or sign) “masks or perverts a basic reality.”<sup>9</sup> This stage accounts for the initial possibility of mis-representation. Here, there remains a faith in the representable, if only because the possibility of misrepresentation implies or reaffirms the possibility of correct/accurate representation. Thus, the second stage further suggests the nature of reality is such that it is representable, and that (objective) truth is a matter of whether (subjective) representation is accurate or faithful to the presented real. For Baudrillard this phase in the development of representation contains within itself at least a germ of, if not a predestination for its own dissolution. In the third phase, Baudrillard claims that the image/sign “masks the *absence* of a basic reality.”<sup>10</sup> Here, the primary function of representation—and perhaps of language as such—is no longer to faithfully reflect the real, but to hide the fact that there is no determinable real to represent in the first place. In other words, the logic of representation paradoxically takes on a *non-representational function*.

It is worth pausing to reflect on the significance of this non-representational function of representation in the third phase, which is a central component of several technological mechanisms described and theorized throughout this dissertation. The third stage is key to developing an understanding of what Baudrillard means by the “hyperreal.” I think the function of representation theorized within this phase might be best understood in terms of the contradictory dimensions of the real: its *excesses* and *absences*. The third phase of the representational image entails a kind of profound absence-void in the sense that there is no longer a real to be represented by representation. A plethora of representation itself—the accumulation of words and images meant to capture and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

communicate some knowledge of the real—neither represents nor misrepresents reality, but rather eclipses the profound hidden void in its place. This idea might be interpreted as belonging to a kind of nihilistic epistemology, but this would be misleading. For Baudrillard, it is not simply the case that the real has never existed and representation is a ruse which hides this fact, but that the *determinable* real has been propagated and proliferated in the development of western (scientific and philosophical) thought, the logic of which (and perhaps logos itself) has, in effect, self-annihilated. The third stage he describes is not necessarily a matter of encountering an a priori void, but rather the crater left behind by the collective efforts to represent reality throughout western history. As Baudrillard would later articulate this situation: reality itself has been murdered in “the perfect crime.”<sup>11</sup>

This logic of representation (which is soon to become a logic of simulation) thus not only involves a profound absence, but also a profound excess (namely, the excess of representation and signification). In other words, out of this void which it has presumably hollowed, representation assumes a *productive* primary function. According to Baudrillard, there occurs “a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. [...] there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production.”<sup>12</sup> Representation continues to function just as before, producing and communicating discursive and material artifacts of knowledge and truth. But its function is no longer driven exclusively by the assumption that reality is representable. When representation is faced with a void of indeterminable reality—which is not necessarily an *empirical* void, but rather a *conceptual*

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<sup>11</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (London; New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 12-13.

void brought about by the conditions of western epistemology—it enters into a panicked production to fill this fundamental absence. This process culminates in an exponential production, reproduction, and accumulation of the signs, images, and discursive artifacts of a variable and contradictory real. Baudrillard refers to the summation of these effects on reality as "*hyperreality*." In trying to make the object *real* or intelligible to the subject, representation ironically annihilates over time the very possibility of accessing it altogether. What is left behind is not the apocalyptic nihilistic void which worried so many philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the result of a hyperreal accumulation. Thus, alongside the nearly altogether untempered material accumulation and expenditure of resources which characterize postindustrial capitalism and the consumer society, eventually, there is also *informational* accumulation—the digital output of accumulated representation. Digital technologies—and with them, the network societies which they render possible—emerge as the pinnacle of automated mediatic accumulation. The void stimulates accumulation—absence stimulates proliferation—and the accumulation reproduces the epistemic conditions of this void, ad nauseam. The eventual result is the displacement of a homogeneous reality (epistemologically speaking) by a radically heterogeneous *hyper-reality*. Put differently, the will to represent reality exponentially (re)produces certain mediatic effects—e.g., signs, images, and representations—which thoroughly saturate the real. The content of reality becomes not much more than its very hallucination, or hyper-reality, which is "more real than the real."<sup>13</sup> Thus, hyperreality is not to be confused with a vulgar 'postmodern relativism' (a confusion that some critics of Baudrillard seem to share); it is, rather, the conceptual result of a

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 99.

complex and technical logic of cultural, economic, linguistic, technological, and epistemological accumulation. Baudrillard describes this as the fourth phase of simulation, wherein the sign or image "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum."<sup>14</sup>

### **3. The Challenge of Principality: Baudrillard, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism**

The theorization of the "fourth order" of simulation, I would argue, contains some of the most notable textual evidence for suggesting there is a stark and irreconcilable contrast between Baudrillard and other thinkers often associated with critical theory and/or postmodern and poststructural thought. Moreover, the fourth order may provide an analytical basis for determining which traditional theoretical and methodological constraints Baudrillard has transgressed, and to which project(s) he remains committed, if any.

The idea that the sign/image no longer represents reality suggests an ability to (or perhaps more precisely, a conceptual foundation for) continuing to think outside the fragmentary and localizing logics of postmodernity. To be sure, however, the recognition and explication of these processes of the sign and representation are not completely unique to Baudrillard. In Foucault, for example, the sign also seems to have taken on a function other than representation. For Foucault, the sign shifts from having a representational value to a constitutive one: an *operational lightness* to a *self-operated density*. And because the sign deceives, because it takes on the ideological veil of the function of representation, for Foucault its status shifts from neutral to malevolent:

I mean that there is in the sign an ambiguous and somewhat suspicious form of ill will and "malice" ("*malveiller*"). And this is to the extent that the sign is already an interpretation that

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<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

does not appear as such. Signs are interpretations that try to justify themselves, and not the reverse.

Thus money functions in the way that one sees it defined in the [...] first volume of *Capital*. Thus symptoms function in Freud. [...] [The sign's] own density comes as though to open itself up, and all the negative concepts that had until then remained foreign to the theory of the sign can hurl themselves into the opening. [...] Now a whole play of negative concepts, of contradictions, of oppositions, in short, the whole play of reactive forces [...] will be able to organize itself in the interior of the sign.

"To stand the dialectic back on its feet": if this expression must have a meaning, would it not be precisely to have put back into the density of the sign, into this open space, without end, gaping, into this space without real content or reconciliation, all this play of negativity that the dialectic, at last, had unleashed by giving it a positive meaning?<sup>15</sup>

Evidently for Foucault, the sign is something which is no longer empty or instrumentally independent of the real it represents. On the contrary, the sign has become the very density of reality itself. But why does he interpret density and malice as qualities belonging to the sign? From the perspective of Baudrillard's fourth order, the sign is only malicious insofar as the interpreter interprets signs with the expectation that they will correspond to some reality or substantial truth. Does Foucault's very recognition of the density and malice of the sign not seem to cause its density and malice to evaporate? If Foucault is unable to think so, it is perhaps because he is unwilling to enter the domain of the "pure simulacrum" in the fourth order of simulation. He is still stuck in the order of representation. Baudrillard writes, "The transition from signs which dissimulate something"—the first and second orders whereby the sign functions in attempt to dissimulate reality—"to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing"—the third order whereby the sign functions to mask the absence of the reality by way of assuming the appearance of its representation—"marks the decisive turning point"—a turning point which Foucault fails to acknowledge or identify.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998) 277.

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 12.

The identification of the sign as dense or weighty is always already involved in the inauguration of a successive phase of simulation, whereby the sign contributes to a more weightless reality. Baudrillard claims:

All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, [...] a gigantic simulacrum [...] exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his best efforts to move past a Eurocentric perspective on language and epistemology, Foucault is still engaged in the “wager on representation.” As density, he recognizes the sign in its own ability to configure and re-configure, (re)produce itself, and proliferate. There is still a metaphysics of the sign in Foucault’s texts. A central philosophical tension between the two thinkers is that Foucault sees the abilities of the sign in terms of the function of its artifice—the ideological stage of representation, or the “third order,” while Baudrillard pushes the logic of the sign beyond itself and conceptualizes a stage which is transgressive of artifice and ideology. This is not to say, however, that Baudrillard theorizes a stage in which humans transgress ideology in any sort of socially emancipatory sense, but rather a stage in which ideology itself transgresses reality by eliminating all distinctions between the two. In many ways, this seems to be a much more insidious and inescapable situation (but perhaps according to Baudrillard’s perspective it does not have to be).

Similar to the respective analyses of Foucault and Baudrillard on the sign, Lyotard analyzes what he calls the “narrative function”<sup>18</sup> in “the context of the crisis of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

narratives."<sup>19</sup> As he describes it, the crisis of narratives is more or less synonymous with a crisis of representation—narratives are released from the realities they narrate. Like the representational sign, or as a semiotic configuration of many signs, the narrative continues to function and proliferate, despite having lost "its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal."<sup>20</sup> This description fits the bill for Baudrillard's hyperreality. But unlike Baudrillard, what follows for Lyotard is not an analytics of something new in the saturation of representational knowledge (e.g., the conceptualization of simulation, hyperreality, or the digital), but rather an analysis of the rules of legitimation within a self-contained and self-referential whole of preexisting scientific knowledge: "language games" and the status of knowledge in the repetitions of postmodernity. Similar to Baudrillard's problem with the simulation of God, for Lyotard, western science has simultaneously created on the one hand a ceaseless demand for the legitimation of knowledge (or to draw parallel to Baudrillard, a ceaseless demand for representing the real) and on the other, a radical plurality of those processes of legitimation—an exponential reproduction and proliferation of legitimation functions internal to a system, and panicked by the complete lack of an objective external agent capable of legitimating/verifying hyper-produced knowledges as true or real.

Unlike Baudrillard, Lyotard submits to the 'incommensurability' of this over-productive proliferation of narrativity by welcoming it as part of the postmodern attitude, and by positioning himself within the broader postmodern sentiment of having an "incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>21</sup> For Lyotard, the "metanarrative"—or, more

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xxiv-xxv.

specifically for our purposes here, the referential usage of a theoretical principle to legitimate and mobilize the production of certain truths—meets the end of its formerly assumed legitimacy, and in so doing, ironically becomes subject to its own (de)legitimizing structure. The postmodern production of knowledge begins to look like a kind of endless feedback loop. Likewise, the postmodern condition starts to resemble the immanent self-amplification of an echo chamber.<sup>22</sup>

Lyotard, Foucault, and Baudrillard each articulate a moment of profound doubt about or rejection of the legitimating function of external principles and narratives. Just as God can be reduced to a sign and circulated in linguistic exchange, the mechanisms of detached scientific judgment—all that which rests on the governing ethos of objectivity, verifiability, and reproducibility—also become subject to their own legitimating processes. Metanarratives—often taking form as explanative theoretical principles—cannot function as referential guarantors of the true and the real. Nor can they function as legitimators of knowledge because they are always internal to, or never outside of the language formations and discourses which they purport to be their objects. Every legitimation of knowledge is therefore circular and self-referential. From Baudrillard's perspective, however, I think it is important to note that these internal attempts to verify knowledge are also *accumulative*. Thus, they tend towards the saturation of the system in which/by which they are produced.

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that my characterization of Lyotard's thought is limited in scope to his ideas and articulations in *The Postmodern Condition*. Like Baudrillard's, the corpus of Lyotard's writing is incredibly diverse and by no means unified. Moreover, what I take to be Lyotard's apolitical submission to postmodern incommensurability in *The Postmodern Condition* does not adequately represent the complexity and variation of the political and philosophical ideas and positions developed throughout his career. For an interview in which Lyotard reflects on the diversity of his philosophical life, see Jean-François Lyotard, "That Which Resists, After All," *Philosophy Today* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 402–417.

In discussing Sigmund Freud's developments in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida echoes a concern about the role of theoretical principles as metanarrative devices of knowledge legitimation. He writes that Foucault's response to the legacy of metanarrative principles<sup>23</sup> "would perhaps be something like this: what one must stop believing in is principality or principleness, in the problematic of the principle, in the principled unity of pleasure and power, or of some drive that is thought to be more originary than the other."<sup>24</sup> Whereas Lyotard and Foucault might see principality as having died with the metanarrative, I think Baudrillard may see its death as *an opening for a new kind of principality or theoretical principle*. Just as the third phase of simulation brings with it a series of excesses and absences, the disappearance of the metanarrative—the absence of its legitimacy—means also its proliferation.

To be clear, in Baudrillard's theory of simulation, nothing (no theoretical principle, especially) disappears without also achieving a kind of invincibility or immunity in the reproduction of its image. "Nothing just vanishes; of everything that disappears there remain traces."<sup>25</sup> This is because the real is always already something which has been annihilated by the reproduction of its signs. Thus, theoretical principles and metanarratives are for Baudrillard not dead, strictly speaking. On the contrary, they are almost entirely unavoidable or inescapable in their proliferation. The impossibility of a legitimator—God, a sovereign entity, or an external agent of scientific reason—is ultimately

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<sup>23</sup> Particularly, this is in regards to the discursive and historical significance of the reality and pleasure principles vis-à-vis Foucault's general commitments to developing an analytics of disciplinary power.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Michel Foucault (1926-84): 'To Do Justice to Freud,'" in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89. See also Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey and Gregory Zilboorg (New York; London: Norton, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 25.

what engenders the panicked mobilization of what Lyotard theorizes to be the functions of short-circuited epistemological legitimation system, as well as what Baudrillard theorizes as the panicked proliferation (or hyper-production) of representation.

We should pause here to ask a paradoxical question: can there be a theoretical principle derived from analysis of the processes which seem to annihilate the very possibility of principality? At times, Baudrillard seems to answer yes, but perhaps not in the way one might think: "the principle of simulation," he claims, "wins out over the reality principle just as over the principle of pleasure."<sup>26</sup> If he is right, an indefinable principle responsible for the exponential accumulation of (digital) representation, the endless production of discourse, and the (eventually global) imperative for the exchange and circulation of signs is, paradoxically, *a principle of non-principality*, or a principle of indifference. This describes a complete lack of external control, and thus the impossibility of tempering the production of the real. This principle in many ways defines the so-called postmodern condition: a hyper-connective, semi-automated, and globalized world which has become so radically singular it can no longer even envisage an 'outside' or alterity against which to contrast and define itself, let alone to control or temper the momentum of its production.<sup>27</sup> Starved for differentials, the world hyper-produces them in sign/ification, and thus it fragments from within.<sup>28</sup> In this global situation, no actual social transfiguration is possible because all negativity is constantly absorbed into and appropriated by a greater functional whole: "an omnipotent global techno-structure has been left alone to

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<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 152.

<sup>27</sup> For more relating to this idea, see Baudrillard's concept of "impossible exchange" in Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2011), 3-5.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, May 20, 2003, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>.

dominate."<sup>29</sup> All dialectics—all mediated tensions, and all theses/antitheses regarding the social real and the social imaginary—are thereby reduced to various binary functions of a greater digital whole. This suggests a global (yet culturally fragmentary) singularity, whereby the imperative of production is pushed to the point of implosion and ecological disaster, and has become thoroughly incapable of reversing its destiny. As Carl Schmitt intimates, "The machine now runs by itself."<sup>30</sup>

#### **4. The Role of Critique in Baudrillard: The Frankfurt School, Dialectics, Ideology**

In the two preceding sections, I developed Baudrillard's thought on representation, simulation, and the hyperreal within and against a (brief and limited) survey of postmodern/poststructural thought (i.e., Foucault, Lyotard, and to a lesser extent, Derrida). I contextualized Baudrillard on the basis of two primary conceptual categories or domains of theoretical enquiry: *representation* and *principality*. Furthermore, I argued that Baudrillard, like Lyotard and Foucault, follows a representational logic to its extreme in order to analyze its epistemological consequences or effects. Baudrillard, however, pushes a logic of representation beyond itself, so to speak, into foreign territory: into the domain of representational excess and accumulation. He theorizes how the overextended and hyper-actualized logics of representation lead into the logics of simulation and hyperreality. I now shift to a discussion of Baudrillard's theoretical and methodological bearings within and against a survey of critical theory, with particular consideration of the role that *critique* plays throughout his breadth of work.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 48.

As I noted at the outset of this chapter, critical theory is a bit more tangible than postmodern/poststructural thought in terms of constituting a coherent body of thought or relatively unified intellectual and theoretical tradition. That said, it may be useful to briefly outline some characteristics and commonalities in regards to the transfigurative role of Frankfurt School critique as it relates to the various aspects of Baudrillard's philosophical contributions which are most important to the theoretical/methodological foundations of this dissertation. Firstly, it is worth quoting at length Horkheimer's articulation of the dialectical relationship between Hegelian idealism and Marxian materialism, whereby he outlines the tasks at hand for a 'critical theory of society':

[In vulgar or caricatured idealism] one maintains that ideas or "spiritual" contents break into history and determine the action of human beings. The ideas are primary, while material life, in contrast, is secondary or derivative; world and history are rooted in Spirit. This would be an abstractly and thus badly understood Hegel. Or one believes, contrariwise, that the economy as material being is the only true reality; the psyche of human beings, personality as well as law, art, and philosophy, are to be completely derived from the economy, or mere reflections of the economy. This would be an abstractly and thus badly understood Marx. Such notions naively presuppose an uncritical, obsolete, and highly problematic divorce between Spirit and reality which fails to synthesize them dialectically.<sup>31</sup>

In this passage and elsewhere, Horkheimer articulates a general tendency of the Frankfurt School to criticize narrow or superficial readings and understandings of Hegelian and Marxian dialectics, particularly in regard to strictly idealist/materialist deterministic caricatures of idealism and materialism. Horkheimer highlights the importance and nuance of dialectical tension between the ideal and the real which, he argues, is present in both Hegel and Marx. Elsewhere, he elaborates the role of such nuances of dialectical reason in terms of what he refers to as the 'critical attitude':

The two-sided character of the social totality in its present form becomes, for men who adopt the critical attitude, a conscious opposition. [...] these men identify themselves with

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<sup>31</sup> Max Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research," *Marxists.org Archive* (n.d.). [Bracketed content is my addition].

this totality and conceive it as will and reason. It is their own world. At the same time, however, they experience the fact that society is comparable to nonhuman natural processes, to pure mechanisms, because cultural forms which are supported by war and oppression are not the creations of a unified, self-conscious will. That world is not their own but the world of capital.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, we find in Horkheimer's account of critical theory a notion of critique that is inextricable from the tension between a world which is produced, on the one hand, by the unintentional consequences of reason—or, drawing parallel to Baudrillard, by the unintended consequences of representation—and on the other, the atomized subject-critic's encounter with that world. The critic, who is far from the embodiment of the negative ideal or collective human will, is always subject to the materializations of the unintended consequences of reason and representation.

The central question is this: to what degree does Baudrillard extend the dialectical critical project which Horkheimer lays out? It might be suggested that Baudrillard's writings often take on a form of "immanent critique." David Harvey defines immanent critique as the essence and *method* of critical theory.<sup>33</sup> Echoing and explicating Horkheimer, he argues: "Unlike traditional theory, [...] when critical theory employs its method, it does not remain external to its object. [...] Critical theory's resistance [to orthodoxy] is actually achieved only when it enters into an 'interior dialogue' with its adversary."<sup>34</sup> Allegedly, critical theory as negativity does not presuppose an outside to its object (society), nor does it employ its own external principles against the socio-economic configurations which it negates or mediates. Rather, it "tests the postulates of orthodoxy by the latter's own standards of proof and adequacy," and in so doing:

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<sup>32</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum Pub. Corp, 1982), 207–208.

<sup>33</sup> David L. Harvey, "Introduction," *Sociological Perspectives* 33, no. 1, Critical Theory (April 1990): 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. [Bracketed content is my addition].

orthodoxy's premises and assertions are registered and certain strategic contradictions located. These contradictions are then developed according to their own logic, and at some point in this process of internal expansion, the one-sided proclamations of orthodoxy collapse as material instances and their contradictions are allowed to develop 'naturally'.<sup>35</sup>

The concept of immanent critique, then, perhaps mirrors or is somewhat indebted to the general method of Marx's critique utilized in *Capital: Volume 1*, whereby the framework for capital built by liberal political economy is not negated outright by the claim of its ideological ruse, but rather it is developed according to its own logics, and as an immanent historical and material condition. Marx begins by accepting the terms of political economy in order to identify its internal contradictions and theorize capitalism's collapse not from some external force, but by its very own accord.<sup>36</sup> Is this not also what Baudrillard does by following the logic of representational knowledge practices into the unfolding of its own contradictions—particularly, the development of representation into its own implosive collapse (and thus also the collapse of western reality)?

To my mind, there is a characteristic, or perhaps a theoretical principle in Marx which should be much more prevalent than his often exaggerated materialism or the dialectical metanarrative (which Horkheimer, Baudrillard, and Lyotard each justifiably refuse), namely, the *principle of critique*. What this principle entails, I think, is a commitment to look for enslavement and domination in its most unlikely and unapparent configurations. Was the bourgeoisie not 'liberated' from the old feudal world, or at least, did this liberation—this ideology of freedom which unleashed the *free reign of ideology*—not present itself as a realized emancipation, a mark of enlightenment's success? Marx's overarching scientific project extended, for example, through Horkheimer's call for a 'self-

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin Classics, 1992).

critique' of reason, is perhaps capable of recognizing, tantamount to Baudrillard, the plasticity of the real in order to conceive of its transfiguration.<sup>37</sup> This project of social transfiguration by means of immanent critique is not necessarily utopian, nor does its emphasis on consciousness pose an idealist Hegelian re-inversion of Marx. Rather, it proceeds by way of explicating the complexities of material production, and by theorizing where these complexities (and the social arrangements from which they are inextricable) might lead. What is arguably more important than a particular model of social transfiguration for Marx is the *critical methodological principle* that he lays out in some of his earliest writings: "The advantage of the new trend: that we do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism of the old."<sup>38</sup> How do we approach this in Baudrillardian terms? Firstly, we take the domains of "predominant interest,"—for Marx, it was religion and politics; for this dissertation, it is the digital, its virulent effects and socio-cultural formations—"however they are, for a starting-point, and not set up against them some ready-made system."<sup>39</sup> Thus immanent critique is already a "ruthless criticism of everything existing," and an approach with which Baudrillard seems to be familiar (and in his early work, quite sympathetic to).<sup>40</sup>

One might interject here the worry that immanent critique does not totally explode "orthodoxy's truth-claims from within,"<sup>41</sup> but inadvertently or unknowingly contains its own ideology in the form of dialectical mediation, which despite its efforts, still implicitly

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<sup>37</sup> See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 177.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard's earlier works like *The System of Objects* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* are, at least explicitly, undoubtedly more sympathetic to the general Marxist approach than his later works.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey, "Introduction," 6.

presumes an external agentive position. Does a dialectical view of society not seem to stand radically outside of the current orthodoxy of scientific-pragmatic and lived epistemology? Put differently, does affirmation of dialectical reason not presuppose a truth to dialectics *as such*? Does every methodology, for that matter, presuppose that there is some external truth or truth-value of the essence/structure/character of its approach?

The root of this question, I think, is central to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Search for a Method*. In its opening section, he outlines a consideration of the philosophical and social tensions between the peculiarities/particularities of individual experience found in psychoanalysis and existentialism on the one hand, and the totalizing systems of dialectical reason in Hegelianism and Marxism on the other. He writes:

Today social and historical experience falls outside of Knowledge. Bourgeois concepts just manage to revive and quickly break down; those which survive lack any foundation. [...] Psychoanalysis, after a spectacular beginning, has stood still. It knows a great many details, but it lacks any firm foundation. Marxism possesses theoretical bases, it embraces all human activity; but it no longer *knows* anything. Its concepts are *dictates*; its goal is no longer to increase what it knows but to be itself constituted a priori as an absolute Knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

It seems that in Sartre's view, a kind of "frozen Marxism,"<sup>43</sup> as a force of "bureaucratic conservatism,"<sup>44</sup> has suspended what we might think of as its own radical philosophical commitments. Frozen in/by communist systems of governance, Marxism is effectively stripped of its dialectics of becoming; it no longer acts as a philosophy of totalization and absorption, but as an always-already totalized epistemological system, which (violently)

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963), 28.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. Given the historical geo-political context at the time of writing (1960), it is likely that Sartre is largely referring here to various political/social/cultural formations and configurations of the USSR, but he never makes this entirely clear or concrete.

forces its supposedly a priori truths upon the world. Most importantly for the purposes of our current discussion, it seems that such Marxist institutions/systems actively betray the philosophical totalization/absorption demanded by the "ruthless criticism of everything existing." No longer clearly involved in a commitment to transfigure/revolutionize the world by means of its critique, a certain predominant form of Marxist governance instead tries to solidify its concepts into the very contents of that world, and thereby into "dictates," as Sartre puts it. This formation/abstraction/bastardization of Marxist philosophy is no longer a matter of employing the "critical attitude," but rather a model/framework/guideline which is applied (forcefully) onto the social real.

Insofar as the Marxian critic's 'self' is included in Marx's global frame of "everything existing," there remains a profound question for critical theory regarding its treatment of self-critique. This self-critique, I argue, is perhaps something that attests to Baudrillard's formal break with Marxist thought.<sup>45</sup> Although generally thought to take place later in his career, I believe that Baudrillard anticipates his break with Marxist critique as early as *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Consider the following passage, where he criticizes Marxism for its historical inability to provide a self-critique of its own underlying processes of ideological production:

What else is intended by the concept of "commodity fetishism" if not the notion of a false consciousness devoted to the worship of exchange value [...]? All of this presupposes the existence, somewhere, of a non-alienated consciousness of an object in some 'true,' objective state: its use value?

The metaphor of fetishism, wherever it appears, involves a fetishization of the conscious subject or of a human essence, a rationalist metaphysic that is at the root of the whole system of occidental Christian values. Where Marxist theory seems to prop itself up with this same anthropology, it ideologically countersigns the very system of values that it otherwise dislocates via objective historical analysis. By referring all the problems of

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<sup>45</sup> For further discussion of this break and the relationship between Marxist thought and Baudrillard's early work, See François Debrix, "Jean Baudrillard," in *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, ed. Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2009), 55–56.

'fetishism' back to superstructural mechanisms of false consciousness, Marxism eliminates any real chance it has of analyzing the *actual process of ideological labor*. By **refusing to analyze the structures and the mode of ideological production inherent in its own logic, Marxism is condemned** (behind the façade of 'dialectical' discourse in terms of class struggle) **to expanding the reproduction of ideology, and thus of the capitalist system itself.**<sup>46</sup>

Thus, it would seem for the early Baudrillard that Marxism, in the form of the problematic of alienation, always inadvertently presupposes the notion of an *un*-alienated consciousness.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the ideological analytics of false consciousness seem to propagate and reaffirm, through 'demystification', the notion of a social real that is somehow 'veiled' or distorted by ideology. Moreover, not only are the ideological metaphysics of consciousness that propagate the capitalist system merely reaffirmed,<sup>48</sup> but also *reproduced*. This, I take it, is a precursor to the productive processes of the real that Baudrillard describes in his later work on simulation and hyperreality.

In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard writes that "capital, which is immoral<sup>49</sup> and unscrupulous, can only function behind a moral superstructure, and whoever regenerates this public morality (by indignation, denunciation, etc.) spontaneously furthers the order of capital."<sup>50</sup> Because capital "is a monstrous

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<sup>46</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Telos Press Publishing, 1981), 89–90. [Emphasis added].

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of this issue in terms of situationist-style Marxism, see my "Locating the Real: Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle," *Public Knowledge Journal* 4, no. 1 (2012), [http://pkjournal.org/?page\\_id=1920](http://pkjournal.org/?page_id=1920). Additionally, see the following chapter, which develops a related critique of the problematic of alienation.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., *homo economicus*, the atomized subject, individual cognition over class consciousness, etc.

<sup>49</sup> I would challenge the term 'immoral' in this passage, as 'amoral' would be more precise and consistent. Soon after, when Baudrillard refers to capital as a "monstrous unprincipled undertaking," the implication is that to be immoral seems to require a principle of immorality, just as to be moral seems to require a principle of morality. The work of capital neither subscribes to nor follows a moral/immoral dialectical principle or set of principles, but rather it absorbs all such domains of activity through its own virulent indifference to them. See Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

unprincipled undertaking, nothing more,"<sup>51</sup> a negation by means of moral critique is analogous to trying to put out a fire with gasoline. Thus, "All that capital asks of us is to receive it as rational or to combat it in the name of rationality, to receive it as moral or to combat it in the name of morality. For they are *identical* [...]"<sup>52</sup> Because the totalized system produced by capital functions not on the basis of the principles of negativity or positivity, but rather on the basis (or baselessness) of a kind of principle of absorption and co-optation—or, put differently, a kind of paradoxically unprincipled principle of totalization—critical negativity is always appropriated as a function of the very totality which it negates. Dialectics are rendered futile.<sup>53</sup>

Arguably, Baudrillard attacks Marxist dialectics with the very ruthlessness professed (but not necessarily actually employed) by Marx himself. By the time of his theoretical work on simulation and the hyperreal, what remains of Baudrillard's Marxism other than precisely the ruthlessness of his criticism? Would it be accurate to claim that the development of a theory of simulation is a kind of immanent critique which defeats its own dialectical underpinnings? Does Baudrillard out-Marx the Marxists and out-criticize the critics? If so, does he conduct a critique of critique (perhaps with a similar sentiment as Horkheimer's reasoned critique of reason<sup>54</sup>)? Perhaps the development of simulation is the only Marxist critique that makes sense if the referential real is "*that which is always already reproduced*. The Hyperreal."<sup>55</sup> This would not suggest, however, that Baudrillard presents a 'purer' Marxism than the Frankfurt School, nor would it mean that one should

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>53</sup> This point is developed later in Baudrillard's concept of "hegemony" in Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (Los Angeles; Cambridge: Semiotext(e); MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> See Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*.

<sup>55</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 146.

situate him as a mere footnote to or afterthought of critical theory. Rather, what we have to gain by this analysis is the tracing of Baudrillard's thought starting from loci of specific methodological containments in historically situated analytical modalities of critique, to his transgression of those methodological containments made evident by his theorization of hyperreality. Parallel to the ways in which the logic of representation gives way to an annihilation of its foundations in simulation, the logic of critique gives way to an annihilation of its dialectical foundations. In simulation, perhaps Baudrillard realizes a fuller critical practice of the original sense of ruthlessness called for by Marx: a hyper-critique, or a new hyper-mediated form of critique. That is to say, he realizes a form of critique in which "the criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions,"<sup>56</sup> *even if its conclusions seem to eradicate the very methodological and epistemological foundations on which the critique is originally founded.*

Perhaps the best way to save the dialectic is to kill it—to mummify its corpse in the eternal proliferation of signs. Thus, the claim that for Baudrillard dialectics are dead is misleading and oversimplified. As discussed in the previous section, in hyperreality there is no absence without simultaneous proliferation. The two stand as mutual preconditions for one another. To claim that dialectics are completely absent in hyperreality would constitute a failure to disambiguate Baudrillard's hyperreality from the vulgar relativism of postmodernity's repetition of the old. As Tim Luke puts it: "To characterize hyperreality, Baudrillard argues that one must see everything anew."<sup>57</sup> Perhaps enough time has passed to develop and reiterate the futility of dialectics vis-à-vis the absorptive processes

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<sup>56</sup> Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing," 13.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy W. Luke, "New World Order or Neo-World Orders: Power, Politics and Ideology in Informationalizing Glocalities," in *Global Modernities, Theory, Culture & Society*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 96.

of a self-referential totalized/totalizing global circuit, e.g., global informational networks, the proliferation of social media, and the emergence of digital culture. What has arrived in simulation is perhaps not actually something altogether new, but simply an opening for theorizing what comes next (or maybe an analytical effort to determine what already 'came next').

Thus far, this chapter has pointed toward the development of a critical method for understanding the nuanced productive processes, functions, and functors of hyperreality in its newness. But what might this method look like? To get at the root of this question with regards to the mode of *critique* employed by Baudrillard, the inquiry should not be about the status of dialectics in a totalizing hyperreality which absorbs all negativity in its own propagation, but rather the question of what, if anything, *is in the stead of dialectics after simulation?* At this juncture, the following question comes to mind: assuming that Baudrillard engages in radical non-dialectical (or perhaps anti-dialectical) critique, to what end(s) does he do so? It would perhaps be helpful here to further delineate the role of critique and dialectics in Baudrillard's theorizations, particularly in contradistinction to both the postmodern attitude towards fragmentary knowledge-politics, as well as to a wider breadth of critical-dialectical approaches in the Frankfurt School. Let us briefly consider one primary analytical domain of the latter, the roots of which are firmly planted in Marxist historico-political and philosophical critique: *ideology*.

Adorno once wrote: "Nothing remains of ideology but the recognition of that which is—a model of behavior which submits to the overwhelming power of the established state of affairs."<sup>58</sup> Adorno provides an early announcement of the totalizing effects of

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<sup>58</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Ideologie," in *Ideologie: Ideologiekritik und Wissenssoziologie*, ed. Kurt Lenk (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1961), 262. This particular translation is based on Marcuse's translation in

domination by (hyper)reality. It is thus no longer the case (if it ever was) that ideology can be purely understood in the functionalist definition of that which masks or obscures reality. It is as if the class locus of bourgeois strategy—the domination/exploitation/subjugation of all things proletarian—has been suffocated by the weight of its own strategy's consequences. It is not the case that today in the west we are liberated from the repressive spectre of theological order, nor are we liberated from the memory of a metaphysical domination by the 'progress' of scientific thought. *On the contrary, domination itself was the liberated historical subject, and today there is no reality outside that of domination.*<sup>59</sup> This is ultimately the situation of the self-referential closed circuit of simulation described by Baudrillard. Thus, I see no reason that Baudrillard could not be thought to carry on the critical tradition of thinking about both domination and ideology, even if he disavowed himself from its terminology. If anything, he intensifies the tradition and pushes it beyond its own methodological (de)limitations. There is no 'challenge' to critical theory in Baudrillard (as there is in the sense of Foucault's challenge<sup>60</sup>). Within certain dimensions of Baudrillard's thought, there exists extreme instances/expressions of a central principle of critical theory: *ruthless critique*. That such a principle is pushed to the point of his disavowal of the general dialectical/ideological approaches and philosophical commitments from which it originates is what makes

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Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 119–120.

<sup>59</sup> This proliferation of domination, however, seems to be precisely what stops Baudrillard from using its terminology. He suggests the new situation is no longer characterized by the master-slave relationship of domination, but by the "hostage" situation of global hegemony. See Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, 33-56.

<sup>60</sup> See Stephen K. White, "Foucault's Challenge to Critical Theory," *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (June 1986), 419.

Baudrillard most interesting methodologically, and poised to aid in contemporary digital media analysis.

This is not to say, however, that Baudrillard is a critical theorist, or that he fits neatly into the Frankfurt School tradition. In *Screens of Power*, Luke characterizes critical theory by “three fundamental qualities.”<sup>61</sup> In consideration of what I have claimed to be the role of critique in Baudrillard’s thought, these qualities are worth examining at length:

**First**, such theories are essentially reflective, reflexive, and ironic rather than positive, objective and methodologically formalistic.

[...] **Second**, critical theory adopts the goal of guiding human actions to realize greater emancipation and enlightenment in the lives of people today. By refining people’s thinking abilities and moral sensibilities, critical theorists hope to equip individuals with a new consciousness of what must be done and how to do it. This consciousness might help them determine what their best interests should be besides gauging how far they must move away from currently held beliefs that embody elements of domination and exploitation. By helping people come to such realizations, critical theory advances human emancipation from the victimization that people impose on themselves from within or that is forced upon them from without.

[...] **Third**, critical theory also advances a systematic radical critique of society. It demystifies how power, position, and privilege relate to class, group, and personal inequalities.<sup>62</sup>

In terms of the first quality, I think Baudrillard mostly fits the bill. As I have argued, he typically opts for a “reflective, reflexive” theory. Baudrillard generally treats the reality-theory relation with a kind of plasticity that resists positivism by criticizing/analyzing its far-reaching effects (in/as simulation). Against the latter two qualities, however, he contrasts greatly. I think, in general, Baudrillard is quite suspicious of the Enlightenment morality of emancipation. Additionally, he has an incredibly broad conception of domination, and does not always utilize it *explicitly* as a primary category in his theorization of simulation. In his conceptual and philosophical universe, “even the super-

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<sup>61</sup> Timothy W. Luke, *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination, and Resistance in Informational Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9. [Emphases added].

powers [...] are not free—the whole world is satellised.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, as I suggested above, the field of domination is almost impossibly all-encompassing, to the point that even the term ‘domination’ loses meaning for lack of differentiation or exception. Because everything is domination, nothing is. For Baudrillard, domination is not directly a matter of removing what is “blocking the conditions that would allow them [people] to realize liberation,”<sup>64</sup> but rather a matter of thinking about our radical domination by oppressive hyperrealist systems, situations, and inevitabilities, which are ironic results or effects of liberation writ large. The so called liberation implied by media and ‘free press’, for example, results not in the possibility of truth’s emergence through critical transparency, so much as it results in a total informational *aporia*.<sup>65</sup> For Baudrillard, emancipation from falsity, from mystified reality, only seems to regenerate, pluralize, and proliferate our subjection to a greater totalitarian whole: a result of the principle of simulation as *an outcome of* the political history of emancipatory revelation. Here, information floods airwaves much in the way that a room full of people speaking at once prevents any single voice from being heard: complete media saturation. The ‘freedom of information’ in this sense is not the free activity of democratic subjects in discourse, but the free activity of *signs in-information* with one another, eventually accumulating in a cyberscape of production-consumption-communication: the collapse of all former categories of political economy and communication into a placeless space (or rather, a virtual/global space) of their own controlled negativity. This is the ‘virtuality’ of an oppressive hyperrealist metasystem, or “global techno-structure,” which is tightly controlled by its own technological automation,

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<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Luke, *Screens of Power*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 48.

or the processes of digital reproduction. It is as if “the medium is the message”<sup>66</sup> now rings truer than ever, *yet the message is null*. All that remains is static, white noise.<sup>67</sup>

For another critical theorist, Benjamin, this all-encompassing domination<sup>68</sup> has roots not necessarily in representation as such, but in the *written form* of language. Specifically, he looks at the use of allegory during the seventeenth century “not [as] a convention of expression, but an expression of convention.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, the allegory is for Benjamin not simply a historically situated medium or a conventional form for expressing a temporally situated real; it does not convey the conventional representational modality of some particular type of expression. Instead, it is the convention itself that is expressed by the allegory. Benjamin writes:

It is possible, without contradiction, to conceive of a more vital, freer use of the revealed spoken language, in which it would lose none of its dignity. This is not true of its written form, which allegory laid claim to being. The sanctity of what is written is inextricably bound up with the idea of its strict **codification**. For sacred script always takes the form of certain complexes of words which ultimately constitute, or aspire to become, **one single and inalterable complex**.<sup>70</sup>

This notion of the “codification” of texts as a process of constituting the formation of “one single and inalterable complex” predicts, as Baudrillard also seems to intimate, the broadest extent of our domination in informational society. That is to say, no matter what we do—especially now that the form of writing has given way to the electronic explosion of digital representation—we *codify our own domination*. Perhaps, the secret ploy of the

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<sup>66</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>67</sup> For an example of an exploration of these effects of media saturation in postmodern literature, see Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Although like Baudrillard, domination is not the language Benjamin uses here.

<sup>69</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Allegory and Trauerspiel,” in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 175.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* [Emphases added].

widespread celebratory/liberatory obsession with individualistic 'free' expression/representation/signification via 'smart' technologies (smart phones, smart homes, smart cars, etc.) is, ironically, its deployment of compulsions.

Could globalized digital culture not be appropriately thought of as something rooted in this tendency to become, as a totalizing outgrowth of language, "one single and inalterable complex?" Perhaps this question can help to better realize, beyond the methodological limitations of a post-Weberian analysis of bureaucratically stabilized (and technologically reproduced) power, the fuller reach of Hannah Arendt's "tyranny without a tyrant."<sup>71</sup> For even bureaucracy seems to dissolve under the totality of its own simulatory processes. In simulation, power is radically leveled, and supposedly it can also be 'democratized'.<sup>72</sup> And thus, Baudrillard also challenges Foucault to consider power as something which is "not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us, dissolved by reversal, cancellation, or made hyperreal through simulation (who knows?)."<sup>73</sup>

## **5. The Politics of Seduction, and Baudrillardian Symptomology as a Critical Digital Method**

The question of power in simulation—its dissolution/dissemination, but also its reproduction in signification—always already implies the question of its resistance.

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<sup>71</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 81.

See also, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>72</sup> For a concise instance of such democratic sentiment/hope, see Nancy Snow's comparative analysis of the CNN media ecology of the 1990's versus the media ecology of Twitter in relation to the 2009 Iranian presidential election: "What's That Chirping I Hear? From the CNN Effect to the Twitter Effect," in *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, ed. Yahya R. Kamalipour (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, trans. Nicole Dufresne et al. (LA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 31.

Likewise, our total encapsulation/domination by a totalizing field of hyper-produced information and an "omnipotent global techno-structure" implies the political/social question of our emancipation. Inquiring into the opening of a critical digital method suggested by Baudrillard's work is as much a political task as it is an epistemological one. Thus, I begin with a crucial question: is there any heuristic, politically subversive value to the Baudrillardian theoretical approach which I have spent the majority of this chapter identifying and outlining? I will suggest in this concluding (but nevertheless inconclusive) section that there is perhaps an opening for (something like) subversion in Baudrillard's thought, but not one that comes easily, with regularity, certainty, or without several theoretical and strategic difficulties and conceptual contradictions. Although inconclusive, it may be useful to begin laying the framework here in order to establish not only the methodological approach, but also the political stakes for subsequent chapters. But first, it is necessary to further outline the current techno-social conditions/situation of codification, informationalization, and *cyberneticization*, which conjure the political will to begin with.

If Baudrillard's thought challenges the dialectical methods inherent in (Marxist) critical theory, it generally does so on the basis of an understanding that capital absorbs and appropriates negativity. This insight is shared, to some extent, by the so-called 'pessimistic' critical theory developed in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where it is theorized in terms of our domination by "the principle of equivalence."<sup>74</sup> Through a principle of equivalence in Enlightenment, they argue,

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<sup>74</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 12.

"Representation gives way to universal fungibility."<sup>75</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno, there is a tendency exerted by capital to level all things, all human relations and social forms, into the exchange of mere signs.<sup>76</sup> This leveling by exchange has taken place through the proliferated hyper-signification of the age of Enlightenment, the processes of which appear to be similar to the representational processes described by Baudrillard's four orders/phases/stages of representation-simulation. In most strands of Marxist dialectics, there is revolutionary potential to be found in social tension. But in the "dialectic of Enlightenment," (as in most of Baudrillard's work), this no longer seems to be the case. Very quickly in the intensified development of post-industrial modes of production, *the tension of impending revolutions is overthrown by the revolution of impending tensions*. By the time we reach a digital mode of the hyper-accelerated, hyper-compressed, and hyper-efficient production (of cultural representation, information, knowledge, truth, the real, etc.), there emerges a paradox: a proliferation of conflict comes about almost as if to *keep conflict at bay*, like a kind of geopolitical auto-immunization.<sup>77</sup> The dialectical historical drama of east-west does not end with a resolution of the Cold War, but a redistribution/dissemination/dissolution of its violence which is still suspended between the two in the Middle East, erupting virulently and in fragmented forms of dis/order and dis/organization as terrorism: war is thus no longer purely a matter of states, but also of *cells* (of terrorism).

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>76</sup> One might consider elsewhere whether this is a precursor to/announcement of Baudrillard's later theorization of the political economy of the sign.

<sup>77</sup> See also Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, 2011).

All negativity is absorbed into a logic of simulation mirroring the 0-1 binary, which, first, structures the self-contained, self-referential functioning of the computer, and, second, affects the expansion of such self-containments into cybernetic productive-consumptive-communicative multi-network systems of cultural and social information. In hyperreality, the contentless foundations of 'the code'—perhaps the result of the leveling function of capital theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer—is ultimately (and ironically) what now structures and de-structures the human social content of reality. Baudrillard writes:

You need two superpowers to keep the universe under control: a single empire would crumble of itself. And the equilibrium of terror alone can allow a regulated opposition to be established, for the strategy is structural, never atomic. This regulated opposition can furthermore be ramified into a more complex scenario.

[...] From the smallest disjunctive unity (question/answer particle) up to the great alternating systems that control the economy, politics, world co-existence, the matrix does not change: it is always the 0/1, the binary scansion that is affirmed as the metastable or homeostatic form of the current systems. This is the nucleus of the simulation processes which dominate us. [...] It is the divine form of simulation.<sup>78</sup>

Hence, in simulation, or in hyper-networked society, one tends to experience the effects of a kind of perfect totalitarian domination in/as cybernetics. Moreover, one experiences this domination regardless of whether one has an awareness of it. Or to make a stronger claim, domination is predominantly experienced today in an insidious mode, which is characterized by virtue of this very unawareness. It is the great ruse of *liberalization* posing as *liberation*, which is necessary for the production of *regulated negativity*, that is to say, negativity which can never actually negate a system, but rather mostly serves as a function to strengthen the "metastable or homeostatic form," and the totalizing conglomeration of our current techno-productivist systems of simulation. In sum, these systems, which not only resist but also appropriate/relegate/regulate critical negativity,

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<sup>78</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 134-135.

form a hyperreal global metastructure of domination: the whole “digital space, a magnetic field for the code”<sup>79</sup> which encompasses everything/everyone. Digitality is precisely this totalizing/globalizing form of metastability<sup>80</sup> through which all social/cultural/political reality is continually codified and informationalized. What remains of the possibility for critique, then, if we are subject to the global domination of this omnipresent digital field which absorbs and regulates all critical negation? What room is left here for politics and the political? Is the situation of simulation post-political?

For Baudrillard, all systems produce their own derailment: all things contain the possibility for their opposite, their reversal. Against the global(izing) west's “*orgy of realism*” or “*orgy of production*”<sup>81</sup>—the culmination of which I take to be the self-referential circuitry of digital media, which constitutes the all-encompassing systems of hyperreality—there is what Baudrillard calls “*seduction*.” Baudrillard writes: “Every *positive* form can accommodate itself to its negative form, but understands the challenge of the *reversible* form as mortal. Every structure can adapt to its subversion or inversion, but not to the **reversion** of its terms. **Seduction is this reversible form.**”<sup>82</sup> Thus, it would seem that the only strategic-heuristic potential of seduction (insofar as heuristic remains a viable term) must forgo a strategy of *subversion* for *reversion*. The critical question is this: if the ‘reversive’ potential of seduction is produced outside the domain of human subjectivity—to which the activity of subversion presumably belongs—then what can we do but sit back

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>80</sup> To some extent, this term ‘metastability’ relates to the cybernetic tendencies of formation, systematization, and stabilization of technological objects expressed in Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Ninian Mellamphy (London, Ontario: University of Western Ontario; Explorations Program of The Canada Council, 1980).

<sup>81</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), 32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 21. [Emphasis added].

and wait for this saving grace? What can we do other than wait and watch for the whole cybernetic metastable system to crumble according to its own imperatives of limitless accumulation? And what can *theory* actually do for liberation in this regard? I would argue that, parallel to the Frankfurt School's tendency to consider theory itself to be *a kind of praxis*,<sup>83</sup> is Baudrillard's aspiration "*to render theory itself seductive.*"<sup>84</sup> This would assume, I think, that 'thought' can play a potentially significant role in whatever takes the place of subversive politics (reversive politics?), but that role—or rather, the theoretical development of that role—remains undeveloped, on the horizon, suspended forever in the abstract or ideal, perhaps, and in the domains of the aporetic and the futural.

Marcus A. Doel explains Baudrillard's concept of seduction as follows: "To be seduced is to be drawn towards something that constantly eludes us, like the inexhaustible face of the beloved, and to lose ourselves on its surface."<sup>85</sup> If this is correct, I might also suggest that the *will to knowledge* is analogous to, if not synonymous with, this draw of seduction. Allegorically speaking, it is, after all, the fruit from Eden's tree of knowledge which some popular readings of the Garden story of Genesis interpret as the original manifestation of seduction. The epistemological project and the political project (insofar as 'political' remains an appropriate term) are intimately intertwined with (if not completely inseparable from) one another. By refusing refusal—by denying the efficacy of a kind of politics that would orient itself against, or in negation of the terms of hyperreal over-production/over-signification—theory allows itself to contribute to this great, global

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<sup>83</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 204.

<sup>84</sup> As noted in Marcus A. Doel, "Seduction," in *The Baudrillard Dictionary*, ed. Richard G. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 186. [Emphasis added].

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

implosion. By outlining the uncanny and seductive contours of digital reproduction, hyperreal accumulation, and global domination of a cybernetic circuitry, the hope here is to provide a contribution (however minor it might be), to that very circuitry—but also, a contribution to the system's overloading, short-circuiting, and its eventual implosion.<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps this is what Baudrillard meant by the seductive capacity of theory?

The political stakes (or, depending on the perspective one takes, perhaps the post-political stakes) of this dissertation are thus loosely rooted in this abstract notion of seduction. I have arrived at seduction by Baudrillardian analysis/critique of other, more traditional modes of conceptual politics such as the (post)Marxist dialectic; yet this dissertation remains indebted, like Baudrillard (regardless of whether he would admit it), to many of the political/social and analytical commitments and impetuses developed within Frankfurt School critical theory. A theoretical extension/update of Baudrillard's understanding of seduction may make for an interesting and important response to the thorough saturation of hyper-productivism which I have described (and which continues to play a central role the overarching theory developed throughout each of the following chapters), but it would also impose severe limits on the dissertation as a whole. The virulent force of Baudrillard's seduction—its power and potency, as I understand it—relies to a great extent on its remaining abstract, insubstantial, nonconcrete, under-signified, and under-articulated. Baudrillard broadly conceives of seduction as a differential/alteriority of and *challenge to* the order of production: the hyper-referential/hyper-representational world of capitalist accumulation, which is overwhelmed by signs and saturated in its own signification to the point of implosion. It seems that as one speaks or writes a theory of

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<sup>86</sup> I return to this concept of implosion in greater detail in the following chapter.

seduction, it has already been reduced to a sign, integrated into the productivist regime, and thus rendered impotent. If seduction operates beneath the orders of production and representation, then perhaps it should remain there.

At any rate, it is my judgment that seduction, however interesting and analytically useful it may be in terms of the political question, remains far too vague and ill-conceived to solely constitute a methodological approach to the analysis of digital media and digital culture with which this dissertation is most centrally concerned. I propose, rather, a kind of unstructured Baudrillardian *symptomology*. Such a symptomatological approach refers to the analytical/observational/descriptive method which can be mobilized to theorize the mediatic effects of disappearance-proliferation in/as digital media and digital culture. This Baudrillardian symptomology, moreover, does not pathologically identify/diagnose symptom-effects in terms of causal relations, nor does it seek to locate and illuminate their concrete sources. On the contrary, this approach theorizes that the mediatic proliferation/saturation of symptoms is the result of precisely the *absence* of such a source: the activities of mediatic signification which virally reproduce and exponentially emanate out of a fundamental absence or radical epistemic/ontic/ontological uncertainty. This Baudrillardian approach revolves around the following overlapping/interrelational theoretical categories discussed above: 1) the multifarious concepts of hyperreality, its 'newness' and the techno-social world of digitality which it inaugurates; 2) simulation and simulacra as transgressive hyper-extensions of representational logic; and 3) issues of globalizing productivist cybernetics and enslavement.

The borrowed medical terminology of symptoms/symptomology lends itself well to a more popularized and everyday media language which is derived from the domain of

microbiology: namely, the language of *viruses/virality*. The following three chapters share a focus on the concept of media virality, which I develop in order to describe and explore a modality of exponential reproduction that is made possible (if not rendered inevitable) by the emergence of digital technology, global networking, and cybernetics. The following chapter examines the particular effects of visual media and the implosion of ocularcentricity, the philosophical implications of the digital image, and the symptoms of its contagion and profusion in digital culture.

## Part II

### Virulence

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## Chapter Three

### Viral Visuality: The Global Proliferation of Social Media

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The Earth, **that phantom limb**, no longer extends *as far as the eye can see*; it presents all aspects of itself for inspection in the strange little window [the computer screen]. The sudden multiplication of 'points of view' merely heralds the latest globalization: the globalization of the gaze, of the single eye of the **cyclops** who governs the cave, that 'black box' which increasingly poorly conceals the great culminating moment of history, a history fallen victim to the syndrome of total accomplishment.

-Paul Virilio<sup>1</sup>

Better than a global violence, we should call it a global virulence. This form of violence is indeed viral. It moves by contagion, proceeds by chain reaction, and little by little it destroys our immune systems and our capacities to resist.

-Jean Baudrillard<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. Seeing is Believing: Ocularcentrism and the Viral Modalities of Productivism

The central concern of this chapter is to take inventory of some of the techno-social effects and philosophical implications of the current state of visually oriented digital media against the backdrop of globalization. Particularly, I aim to shed light on what I refer to as *viral modalities* of the contemporary production, consumption, and distribution of visual media across digital social networks. By 'viral modalities', I refer to the ways in which media phenomena self-replicate (and sometimes evolve) as if by contagion, often unguided by human intentionality, agency, and without clear loci of origin. I highlight how viral modalities of media dissemination involve an accelerated proliferation of visually oriented media. This proliferation, I argue, characterizes a global social and political scenario for which the generalized traditional Marxian problematic of social alienation is

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 347.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, May 20, 2003, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>.

unable to provide a sufficient analysis or framework for resistance.<sup>3</sup>

The age of globalization and digital media is the age of lost cultural centers—a fundamental corelessness of all socially preconfigured epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical grounding. A violent and virulent force of globalization and neoliberalization has hollowed out these centers<sup>4</sup>: a complex of processes whereby the imperative of platonic universality has ironically helped cultivate its own liquidation.<sup>5</sup> The quest for and faith in universality—and with it, the west's wager on verifiable truth and meaning—has given way to what Horkheimer and Adorno called a state of “universal fungibility” in which all former domains of substance, essence, or aura have been leveled against one another in an increasingly hyper-connective global (yet fragmentary) singularity.<sup>6</sup> Representations of social/cultural reality proliferate in intensified exchange, the accuracy or truth of each becoming more or less equiprobable. The tensions between societies, cultures, and classes lose their dialectical potentiality. Social tension becomes less a force of revolution than a strategy of regulation. Technologically enabled and intensified globalization means that each social reality is reduced to an exchangeable representation or series of possible representations that, in turn, are cancelled out by one another, preserving and reproducing a kind of paradoxical global stability through the *instability* of constant economic and

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<sup>3</sup> See Amy E. Wendling, “Alienation Beyond Marx,” in *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation* (Basingstoke, England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 174–212.

<sup>4</sup> An equally violent force has been the momentum of neoconservatism in its various forms which, as Harvey argues, have emerged to try to fill these empty centers (created in large part by neoliberalism in the first place). See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83–85.

<sup>5</sup> See Baudrillard, “The Violence of the Global.”

<sup>6</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 12.

cultural exchange.<sup>7</sup> This makes up what might be called a techno-global metastability.

If it was once possible to conceive of the unfolding of history as something which occurred through processes of social tensions (and their virtual or real resolutions), in metastability it becomes possible to conceptualize the stagnation of history via the stabilized preservation of social tensions and their reduction to mere variables of exchange. History has not ended<sup>8</sup> so much as it has been immunized by a ruthless will to know, understand, and represent its unfolding.<sup>9</sup> It only appears that history has ended because it has been encapsulated in a virulent swarm of its own meaning—stopped dead in its tracks by its own supposed signification, or the production of its signs.

Because this seductive will to knowledge (and likewise, the epistemological will to representation) manifests itself in many variable and contradictory ways, from an innumerable amount of social, cultural, and political vantage points, it will always be a *fragmentary* (yet nevertheless collective) will—a will which breeds perpetual, indefinite, and indeterminable tension and conflict.<sup>10</sup> In that sense, it may be more comprehensive to conceptualize this 'will' as multitudinous manifestations of a greater whole: the west's unyielding productivism, which has gone mostly unchecked and untempered since the Cold War era. As Baudrillard understood it, the west has always had a deep bias for

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding the particularly economic/financial aspects, see the discussion in Charles P. Kindleberger and Robert Z. Aliber, "International Contagion," in *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 123–141.

<sup>8</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> The mobilization of the term 'immunization' here has less to do with biopolitics than with effects of language and media. It is distinct from, but not necessarily incompatible with, Roberto Esposito's usage. See Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, English ed. (Cambridge; Malden MA: Polity, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the linkage between media effects and perpetual conflict, see Ryan E. Artrip and François Debrix, "The Digital Fog of War: Baudrillard and the Violence of Representation," *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 11, no. 2 (2014).

production. He refers to this tendency as part of a broader “orgy of realism” in which “everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded.”<sup>11</sup> For Baudrillard, western expansion has been inherently intertwined with an insidious productivism and will to referentiality—an imperative for all forms of human activity to result in a ‘real’ or visible product of some sort (visuality being the most dominant measure of reality). This imperative motivates material production as well as epistemological production, namely, the production of representational knowledge, or the signs and images purporting to constitute a knowledge of reality.

Globalization might be conceived, then, beyond the descriptive realms of economic and cultural exchange, as a climactic point of untempered productivism. This would explain in part why, in the ‘postmodern’ age of lost centers, we do not encounter a great nihilistic void of meaninglessness reflecting the anxieties of so many European philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We encounter just the opposite: the proliferation of meaning. “Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible. We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite to the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us.”<sup>12</sup> We are gorged with (social) meaning precisely because of its void, its absence; just as we are gorged with the production of history in the absence of History, and gorged with truth in the absence of Truth. The climax, the tipping point with which this chapter is most broadly concerned, is a

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer, CultureTexts Series (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), 34–5.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (NY: Semiotext(e), 1988), 63.

world-wide scenario in which the signs, images, or meanings of cultural and political identity are mass-produced inadvertently by a fragmentary global collective: a mass-production of representational knowledges, a panicked response to the profound absence or indeterminability found in lieu of human bearings in social, cultural, and metaphysical reality.

Globally normalized digital media technologies and practices allow representational production (along with material production) to take place with unprecedented intensity, instantaneity, and scale. Through technologies of representational language and imagery, signs circulate through digital space as if in orbit around a lost center. This, I argue, is at the heart of what is meant by the term viral media even in its most quotidian usage: a modality of the technologically aided production of signs and images, which hyper-extends the visually centric legacy of the western world, and is founded on a multiplicity of intentions to represent phenomenological truth, social and cultural meaning, and intersubjective reality, but instead results in a totalizing accumulation and saturation of representation ad infinitum. I argue that virality is much more than a fad or emergent technological tendency of communication. Virality is something as old as representation itself. Despite the fact that they have only recently received proper nomenclature, media have arguably always behaved virally. Moreover, it is only in the contemporary context of digital network technology that virality has become a (if not the) defining modality of the production, consumption, and dissemination of information in the globalized world. I argue that critical analysis of this media modality reveals the contours of a virulent ocularcentric productivist program: the foundations of digital culture. The central questions, then, are how, when, and whether this productivist accumulation has already reached a saturation

point, and exactly what the contours of that saturation might look like.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Virulence and the Concept of Implosion

At the outset, it is important to note that the viral proliferating effects of digital media described above and hereafter are not exclusive effects of *visually* oriented media. After all, the contemporary techno-social context that is characterized by phenomena such as the intelligence leak, the viral video, and the meme is likewise a context characterized by sound bites, podcasts, streamable music, and exponentially reproducible audio in the age of digital consumerism. Visuality is worthy of individual analysis, however, if only because of the indebtedness of digital media to the western legacy of visual representation as a means of affirming/confirming the real. We cannot, therefore, begin to develop a theoretical framework for the inner-workings of non-visual viral media without first interrogating, at least to some extent, the “ocularcentrism” that has shaped and defined western civilization as we know it.<sup>14</sup> Without the ocularcentric legacy (and for that matter, the legacy of logocentrism), there are no viral media.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, I will suggest that in order to develop any conceptual depth to various non-ocular facets of digital media, it would first be helpful to theorize the implosion of the visually centered world. In other words, a theory of non-visual digital media would still require some analysis of visibility's

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<sup>13</sup> One cannot escape the irony of using visual metaphor to explore/explicate the (catastrophic) effects of the visual hegemony of western productivism. Perhaps it is only through vision that we can gain sight of vision itself, its historical meaning or function. Just as Nietzsche recognizes “at this point I have much to be silent about” yet keeps writing, we may continue to ‘look’ for theoretical insight of vision/the visual. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36.

<sup>14</sup> The neologism of “ocularcentrism”—the centrality of vision in western discourse from Greek philosophy to contemporary French theory—has been thoroughly explored in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> See also Chris Jenks, “The Centrality of the Eye in Western Culture: An Introduction,” in *Visual Culture*, ed. Chris Jenks (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–25.

hegemonic dominance, its thorough saturation of culture, and the terms of its transgression. That said, this section intends to elucidate what is meant by the ocularcentric legacy of the west,<sup>16</sup> and how it has, as I argue, (re)shaped and (re)configured the currents or flows of viral digital media, as well as the virulent digital culture in which and through which digital media are propagated.

If the old adage 'seeing is believing' remains a dominant dictum of modern epistemology and everyday life in the (post)modern world, then it would seem that the modalities of visuality and representation are intertwined. That is to say, they are both enmeshed in the substratum of western productivism. The history of linguistic and epistemological representation—the will to represent reality through the *written* word and image, and the faith that representation can actually constitute knowledge of the world—is undoubtedly an ocularcentric legacy.

According to Heidegger, the epistemological legacy of representation originates in the tragic misstep of Plato, whose allegory of the cave mobilized a narrow understanding of truth. Plato's mistake was to conceptualize truth as representational, Heidegger argues, thus obscuring what he claimed to be a more originary, non-representational meaning of truth (*aletheia*).<sup>17</sup> For Heidegger, truth most originally belonged to the domain of ontology—it had more to do with the immanent condition of being-in-the-world than with a preoccupation with detached knowledge of the objective world. Heidegger argues that

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<sup>16</sup> See Rey Chow's work in this general area regarding visual culture, film, and globalization. Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). See also Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" in *Pathmarks*. Ed. William McNeill. Trans. Thomas Sheehan (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21.

Plato's mistake unknowingly sets a tragic historical trajectory for the development and unfolding of the entire western world.<sup>18</sup> The representational understanding of truth was, for Heidegger, comparable to the biblical Fall, the effects of which culminated over millennia, perhaps reaching a peak in the general crisis of nihilism experienced throughout Europe by at least the nineteenth century (a crisis which is perhaps most notably articulated in Nietzsche's writings on nihilism<sup>19</sup>).

By narrowing down the meaning of truth to its representational connotation—or more precisely, by reducing the human capacity for ontological disclosure entailed by this supposedly more originary sense of *aletheia* to a matter of measurement of accuracy, discrepancy, or *distance* between the 'objective' world and its 'subjective' mental representation—Plato unleashed a metastatic spread of representational truths upon the world, which henceforth confined the nature of truth to the limitations of spatial metaphor and visual referentiality. Regardless of the etymological accuracy of Heidegger's narrative describing the origins of representational knowledge,<sup>20</sup> ocularcentricity and, by extension, logocentricity are undoubtedly two defining characteristics of the western epistemological tradition that has helped shape the contemporary world. Linguistic signification and visual reference have been the primary modalities through which the west has tried to understand, name, and dominate the world. Moreover, insofar as digital media function

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the First and Second Essays in Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Friedländer, a student of Heidegger, argues that Heidegger's claims about the original meaning of *aletheia* are wholly unfounded. He posits that there is no discursive evidence in Greek literature, as Heidegger claimed, that would suggest the alternative meaning of *aletheia* was ever a culturally or discursively prevalent usage. The only evidence for the 'original meaning' that Heidegger develops, he says, is in Hesiod's *Theogony*. But even in *Theogony*, both meanings of *aletheia*—representational and ontological truth—are present. See Paul Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

predominantly on the basis of visual representation via graphical interfaces (such as the monitor/screen), they are two defining characteristics of digital culture as well.

Like Heidegger, McLuhan theorizes a point of origin of western representation and ocularcentricity. However, unlike Heidegger, who locates its root in early philosophical discourse, McLuhan finds its locus in the emergence of the phonetic alphabet—"a medium that depends solely on the eye for comprehension."<sup>21</sup> He argues that the phonetic alphabet, as the central developmental medium of human communication (at least, in the western world), has led to a kind of one-dimensional experience of reality, which has repressed or inhibited other types of sensorial human experience in/of the world. To expound this hypothesis beyond McLuhan's explicit claims, it seems that the emergence of the phonetic alphabet (and moreover, written language as such) injects a kind of arbitrariness into the structure of language,<sup>22</sup> which detaches communication from its immanent position within nature and artificially relegates it to some imagined externality (the supposed spatial vantage point of representation).<sup>23</sup> McLuhan seems to think that this externalization has been central to the technological development and expansion of civilization, but that it has also repressed other formerly central aspects of human experience. "Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind [...] Speech is a social chart of this bog."<sup>24</sup> McLuhan argues that although visuality is but a small facet of human reality, the west has

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<sup>21</sup> Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001), 44.

<sup>22</sup> This quality of arbitrariness (of the sign) was a central theme in the development of much of structuralist semiotic discourse. For example, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1986), 66.

<sup>23</sup> I return to this in the following chapter on the virulent function of language.

<sup>24</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 48.

treated it as its primary foundation. Once vision became the most foundational human faculty for western civilization, the world was henceforth radically transfigured.<sup>25</sup>

McLuhan sees the development of electronic media like television as evidence for a trending return to the “bog” which preceded western logocentricity and ocularcentricity. It seems that, for him, visually oriented media have proliferated outward in a kind of promethean development of western civilization as part and parcel of its technological growth. This proliferation or outgrowth has itself been the result of a profound shift from an originary tribal auditory world—which McLuhan envisions as a kind of localized and unalienated social ontology—to the phonetic and mechanical world of representation, which is dominated by visuality and the epistemological hegemony of written communication.<sup>26</sup> This latter environment is one of social alienation and uprootedness from nature.<sup>27</sup> It is characterized by individuation, fragmentation, categorization, mechanization, automation, and the efficiency of productive processes (although McLuhan stops just short of framing it in terms of capitalist productivism). For McLuhan, this second phase appears to be increasingly anachronistic after the advent and global adoption of connective/communicative electronic media.<sup>28</sup> The effects of media—which for McLuhan are technological “extensions” of organic psychological and physiological human faculties—have in effect accumulated to the point of saturation on a global scale.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>26</sup> See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Although, to be clear, these are not his terms. Broadly speaking, the problematics of social alienation and nature are much more indebted to the Marxist tradition, which McLuhan was not. For a brief discussion of McLuhan's general relationship to Marxism vis-à-vis Baudrillard, see Gary Genosko, *McLuhan and Baudrillard: The Masters of Implosion* (Routledge, 1999), 114-116.

<sup>28</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 3.

This accumulation is characterized by the hyper-connectivity of electronic media across time and space, which he theorized had initiated a transition into a 'third phase' that had already begun to decenter the hegemony of visibility, and would soon inaugurate a "global village."<sup>30</sup> This was to be a transition from modernity to a total global society. The transition would reacquaint and reintegrate the repressed non-visual (and thus also non-linguistic) ontological aspects of human consciousness, and in effect produce a de-alienated, and almost Eden-like, global society, and perhaps a return of the human to a more authentic and original social configuration.<sup>31</sup> There is certainly a political theology at work in McLuhan's theory, which unlike his Catholicism,<sup>32</sup> has gone largely unexamined and undeveloped.

Thus, McLuhan was a teleological thinker of technological and social change, and much of his contribution and import to media studies, communication theory, and social thought has to do with trying to outline the contours—often quite optimistically—of techno-historical transition, and the resultant potentiality for human adaptation to the terms of a new global phase of human society.<sup>33</sup> In his last given interview, McLuhan articulates the final transition as a process of "retribalization"—an event which signifies

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>31</sup> For a concise overview of McLuhan's "triphasic history of our extension, from the oral-acoustic tribal world, to the phonetic-literate, mechanical world, to the contemporary electronic world," see William Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2005) 48.

<sup>32</sup> For an example of explication of the role of McLuhan's Catholicism in his thought, see Genosko, *Masters of Implosion*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> His interest in adaptation to new technological norms puts him at risk of being read as an uncritical proponent of the status quo. But I think this reading ignores one crucial caveat: his advocacy of adaptation refers to adapting to technological reality rather than social reality. If anything, McLuhan probably ought to be read as a technological determinist, quasi-utopian theorist who foresees social reality being transfigured by an already existing technological reality. And with that in mind, we may also read him as a kind of public 'therapist', easing us into this transition of civilization—hence "the medium is the message" and the "massage."

both a return to something ancient, but also, insofar as it takes place on a global scale, the emergence of something completely new.<sup>34</sup> Throughout his corpus, McLuhan theorizes the techno-communicative dimensions of globalization in terms of the effects necessary for the inevitable rejoicing of humanity in advanced hyper-connective society. Growing pains are unavoidable in the formation of a new world order. Thus, the emergent social ills he accredits to the transition—such as new forms of alienation between generations,<sup>35</sup> and the frustrations inherent in trying to apply new media practices to old media concerns,<sup>36</sup> are epiphenomenal to this great transition.

McLuhan refers to the final transition (or perhaps the transitional discomfort it entails) in terms of *implosion* or *implosivity*. In one of his more famous passages in the introduction to *Understanding Media*, he writes: "After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding."<sup>37</sup> Implosion—as in the implosion of a star forming an incommensurably dense black hole—implies a violent end to a long-term production and expenditure. In the sense of media and society with which McLuhan is mostly concerned, implosion is an end of sorts to the production and expenditure of the ocularcentrism and logocentrism of western civilization. And insofar as the west has been defined by such activity, implosion also means the end of western civilization (as we know it). Implosion for McLuhan is not a continuation of the violence of techno-social fragmentation (as it is for Baudrillard); on the contrary, it is a social (re)integration of utopian proportions by technological means.

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<sup>34</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan," *Playboy Magazine*, March 1969, <http://www.nextnature.net/2009/12/the-playboy-interview-marshall-mcluhan/>.

<sup>35</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63; 69; 100.

<sup>37</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 3.

Aside from the ambiguity fundamentally present in all uses of metaphor, that of implosion is perhaps due to its teetering between the conceptual poles of excess and absence, *proliferation and disappearance*, the effects of total and totalizing saturation. The image of the black hole represents both an inexperienceable and indeterminable density into which not even light gains entry, yet also a kind of absence or nullity because of those very qualities. This impenetrable density is the saturation of language, visuality, and the whole edifice of representation—western productivism pushed to its limits and then some.

Much more so than McLuhan, Baudrillard develops the content of this ambiguity, and in so doing, comes to radically different conclusions. I would argue that a violent and fragmentary conception of implosion is central to Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. As discussed in the previous chapter, Baudrillard addresses a new kind of process of production that he refers to as "a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production."<sup>38</sup> Roughly, this is what he calls "hyperreality"—the state or stage in which things lack a singular center, intelligible truth, and clear reference to the real. The radical uncertainty of this condition engenders all the more demand for certainty and truth; thus, they are produced exponentially in/as empty signs and images. Hence, the "hyper" component of hyper-reality—the condition whereby a fundamental *lack* of certain reality is ultimately responsible for its *abundance*, its overproduction. The result is an over-accumulation in the domains of language and visuality, in particular—a total saturation of signs and images depicting the real. Things appear (and are) 'more real than real'. This hyperreal mode of production eventually constitutes a condition of "simulation," according to Baudrillard. In this strange new world,

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 13.

everything has become a simulation of a reality that simply does not exist, or at least, that is entirely indeterminable, inaccessible, or unintelligible to humans.<sup>39</sup> In hyperreality, the panicked demand for the real and the authentic stimulates an economy of signs,<sup>40</sup> which eventually generates a simulatory and virulent implosive environment global in scale—a dense field of signs, which are dense only because of, paradoxically, a fundamental absence.

For Baudrillard, we are most certainly facing, or perhaps have already faced, an implosion in which digital visual media have played a central role. But for him, unlike McLuhan, this implosion is by no means a force of social reconciliation or a return from the Fall. Baudrillard writes: “But nothing will halt the implosive process, and the only remaining alternative is between a violent or catastrophic implosion, and a smooth implosion, an implosion in slow motion.”<sup>41</sup> In the best case scenario, everything has become so fragmented and scrambled that it is no longer even possible (and probably never was possible) to tell when and if the implosion has already taken place, or if it is currently taking place as a slow motion catastrophe. Reality is itself the momentum of a purgatory, produced ad nauseam in the accumulative effects of appearance against absence—something which undoubtedly belongs to the productivist edifice.

Curiously enough, it is *disappearance* rather than appearance—and thus probably absence rather than proliferation—which most concerned Baudrillard toward the end of his

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<sup>39</sup> The distinction between whether reality exists and is indeterminable and it does not and has never existed is irrelevant; the very question—because it seeks to get at the real—belongs to the function of obscuring/annihilating the real, which Baudrillard attributes to the logics of representation/simulation. Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard's early work hints at this formulation, but does not make it outright. See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Telos Press Publishing, 1981).

<sup>41</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 61.

life. In some ways, he laments the disappearance of disappearance, writing that with the digital image, unlike the photograph, "Nothing dies or disappears there."<sup>42</sup> The digital means being overwhelmed, gorged with appearance and visibility. In the example of digital photography, there is no longer a blank, irreducible gap that occurs between a reality that is captured and its reappearance in the representational image. With the pre-digital photograph that needed to be developed through film, there is a necessary pause between the captured presentation of reality and its representation in image. A length of time buffers the real and its representation. This buffer could constitute a moment of agency, or provide at least a shred of hope for facilitating some human intervention in the real. The pause or disappearance between encountering the world and the development of its image-copy is ostensibly for Baudrillard what keeps reality and its representation distinct from one another. It is as if, with the advent of digital photography, the darkroom was a levy that broke under the weight of an almost ubiquitous demand for appearance; after the flood, only the ecstasy of pure light and the constancy of pixels remain. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News blare ideology twenty-four hours a day, just as Amazon.com has no closing time or business hours, and Facebook never sleeps. Herein lies the temporal dimension of the effects of visual media—the unyielding will to render reality readily transparent is always accompanied by a collapse of time (and also, of distance) between the observation of something and its representation. The instantaneity of the digital image is thus part and parcel of the collapse of boundaries between reality and representation writ large, or in Baudrillard's terms, the condition of hyperreal simulation which, as I elaborate in part three, takes shape as the metastable global governance of an advanced cybernetic

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 49.

"techno-structure."<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the digital image, and maybe the entire category of 'the digital' as we know it, is an effect or symptom of, to borrow James Der Derian's term, a "global swarming" of viral visibility at the implosive saturation point of western representation.<sup>44</sup> Representation has overwhelmed even itself by becoming the very content of reality instead of that which represents it. It is in this way that the "referent disappears."<sup>45</sup> But it only disappears in one sense; in another sense the referent appears all around us in a kind of phantasmal overproduction. Baudrillard mastered the art of seeing the absence behind abundance (and the abundance behind absence) despite the overwhelming visual transparency of electronic and digital media. Behind the real—or at least, its panicked overproduction of the image—must always lie its striking absence: the null differential of reality.

For Baudrillard, the categories of absence and disappearance belong not to the order of production/productivism, but to what he conceptualizes as its functional opposite: *seduction*. As I briefly discussed at the end of the preceding chapter, seduction is for Baudrillard what stands against the overwhelmingly viral orgy of hyperreal production. While production is concerned with rendering the real, and perhaps even the referential, seduction is concerned with the opposite—diversion, reversibility, and the enigmatic.<sup>46</sup> If western civilization can be understood as having developed on the basis of a predisposition toward the real, concrete, linear, and irreversible, then Baudrillard seeks to show the ways in which seduction (which never leads anywhere other than astray) may

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<sup>43</sup> Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global."

<sup>44</sup> James Der Derian, "Global Swarming, Virtual Security, and Bosnia," *The Washington Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1996): 45–56.

<sup>45</sup> Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 22; 74.

play secretly underneath processes of reality making, appearance, and production. Seduction is something always working within or underneath a system to undermine and divert itself. Every system (in this case, we might suppose the technological order of digitally regulated metastability) hides its own fatal seduction. Thus, Baudrillard's sense of implosion might look a lot like contemporary digital virulent culture, a total system spiraling out of control, overheating because of its ceaseless operations. Via these operations, the system's internal contradictions intensify and accumulate. The material-immaterial interplay of data centers and cloud computing, for example, is a contradiction operationalized by the scrambled logics of a thoroughly saturated system of production.<sup>47</sup> Here, the proliferation of immaterialist ideology (namely, the consumerist manifold of cloud computing) reifies and reproduces the proliferation of material infrastructures (namely, data centers), and vice versa. The two accelerate one another mutually to a fatal and implosive end. Together they constitute what Baudrillard called a "seductive operation," or a "lightning flash of seduction **melting the polar circuits of meaning**."<sup>48</sup> The two poles accelerate one another's production to the point of annihilation. Thus, we might ask of the distinction between immaterial and material the question which Baudrillard asks:

For what has happened to [...] all these great distinctions which we need to decipher and make sense of our world? All these terms, torn asunder at the cost of unbounded energy, are ready at any moment to extinguish one another, and collapse *to our greatest joy*. Seduction hurls them against one another, and unites them beyond meaning, in a paroxysm of intensity and charm.<sup>49</sup>

This describes the situation of a world in which productive operations have absolutely run

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<sup>47</sup> See also chapter six, where I develop this ideological contradiction in greater detail.

<sup>48</sup> Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication*, 58. [Emphasis added]

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

amuck, exploding everything outward into the real, thereby annihilating all forms of meaning by means of a perfect operational hyper-signification of the world. As subjects, all we can do is revel in awe at the question of just how it is, exactly, that despite all of this, and within a world which seems as though it ought to be a post-apocalyptic world, wherein all meaning has been annihilated by technological and instrumental systematization/mechanization/cyberneticization, production continues to produce, representation continues to represent, desire continues to desire, signs continue to signify, and language continues to communicate. Everything continues to operate as if it were a reflection of the old world before implosion, and with the programmatic operation of a virus.

This is precisely the mode of implosion that Baudrillard describes. It is both a continuation of the explosive promethean productivism which preceded it, *and* a shift towards violent and virulent operations. When anything with enough substance or agency to change the tract of time has long since disappeared, everything operates like a virus—the world unfolds according to various 'genetic data', and nothing can be done to stop or reverse it. This is in stark contrast to the vision of McLuhan's "retribalization." Insofar as McLuhan's conception of implosivity implies a next step in technological and social progress, Baudrillard's and McLuhan's theories are incommensurable. But where the two thinkers converge is in the idea that the contemporary world marks an implosion at the end of western civilization, having extended its ocularcentric/logocentric reach to an entire globe by digital/informational technological means. What McLuhan missed, perhaps, was the inherent *virulence* involved in this implosion. His vision for an unalienated global society does not take into account the continued profusion of a global productivist order. If

anything, his vision is just that: a *vision*, which belongs to the very order which he thought was being radically disrupted, suspended, or overturned but which, according to a Baudrillardian perspective, is actually always in a process of being hyper-extended.

At the end of the day, McLuhan probably remains within the prescriptive socio-political domain of resisting and trying to overcome the condition of alienation. And without doubt, the politics and ethics of alienation are still today very much circulating through circuits of political activism and theoretical social and technological discourses (albeit today most often removed from their historically Marxist contexts). The contemporary problematics and analytics of alienation most notably put in their crosshairs digital consumer technologies and social media.<sup>50</sup> In the following section, I proceed by employing these insights about implosive virulent media and culture in a brief critique of the politics of alienation and digital social media.

### **3. From the Spectacle to the Virus: A Brief Critique of the Analytical Problematic of Social Alienation**

What was expected to be a free, open, and anonymous cyberspace, which allowed for the playful creation (if not deconstruction) of identity, has in a peculiar sense taken a significant turn to the real, at least in the example of one of the most widely used prominent online social networks: Facebook.<sup>51</sup> Social networks and online communities

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<sup>50</sup> For a popular example, see Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). For a less contemporary critique, see also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the sheer volume of Facebook users is sometimes referred to in popular media in terms of its weight, mass, and saturation, implying its implosivity. For example, see Jay Yarrow, "Facebook Is A Fundamentally Broken Product That Is Collapsing Under Its Own Weight," *Business Insider*, December 17, 2013, sec. Tech, <http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-news-feed-benedict-evans-2013-12>. See also the concept of "Zuckerberg's law" as an analogy to Moore's law in

before Facebook were generally built on anonymity and the assumption that a user could represent herself as whomever she wanted.<sup>52</sup> Facebook, however, is (at least in the beginning) built on something far less open. On Facebook, there is an expectation that one's actual personal reality reflects the identity projected on one's "Facebook Page"; and that actual social reality—the activity of one's network of 'friends' on Facebook—is reflected by the Facebook user's activity in real life. Mark Zuckerberg said in a 2009 interview: "The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. [...] Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."<sup>53</sup> A central role of the individual user, then, is to *represent* or report his or her experiences of intersubjective, social reality, which enter into an algorithmic organizational collective "News Feed" of multiple experiences and representations alongside (and in aid to) advertisements—the coagulation of sign, image, and ideology in simulacra. To further complicate this curious social formation, Facebook goes from being a medium of the representative real to the thing that is represented as real (the fourth order of simulation<sup>54</sup>). In other words, Facebook ostensibly becomes the content of the social real itself. The digital becomes more real than the real. If cyberspace was once a spectre of the real world, it is today the opposite case: the real world is a spectre of the digital.

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Saul Hansell, "Zuckerberg's Law of Information Sharing," Blog, *Bits*, (November 6, 2008), [http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/06/zuckerbergs-law-of-information-sharing/?\\_r=1](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/06/zuckerbergs-law-of-information-sharing/?_r=1).

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion on anonymity, identity, and the 'real' person in early Internet communications, see Mark Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2006), 150-153.

<sup>53</sup> Zuckerberg quoted from an interview in David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2011), 199. See also Geert Lovink, "Facebook, Anonymity, and the Crisis of the Multiple Self," in *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge; Malden, Mass: Polity, 2011), 38-49.

<sup>54</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

Facebook may serve as an example, then, of a digital global apparatus involved in an intensified production of representation of the real. 'Authentic' social relations are auto-produced in mass, and authenticity becomes displaced by its own signs. At the same time that authentic connectivity becomes the centralized goal and systematized norm, it loses its fervor and exceptionality. Thus, one commonly encounters silent tables at restaurants, filled with families or couples with their heads buried in hyper-mobile miniaturized social activity terminals. It would seem that the most basic corporeal (social) experience becomes its very opposite: an artificial virtual experience.

This image of the silent table is provocative to the ethical sensibility. It makes us want to change things, to 'fix' the alienating effects of mediatization. But, in truth, it is only one of many contemporary images of (digital) alienation *designed to elicit* a response or productivist activity. It is, in short, one of many mechanisms which ensure general consumer-production and producer-consumption of digital media content. Moreover, the entire theoretical edifice of the problem of and resistance to alienation—from the history of Marxism to contemporary psychology discourses—comes with the risk of absorption into, or co-optation by, the very systems that produce alienation in the first place.

For twentieth-century Marxist thought, the most apparent visual component of alienation is perhaps the idea of the "spectacle"—the figure which situationist Guy Debord developed to critically analyze the social and technological conditions of alienation after the electronic revolution.<sup>55</sup> For some time now, however, and probably even before Debord was writing, it has been epistemologically and politically inappropriate to refer to our social reality in terms of the society of the spectacle. Spectacular society requires at least a

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<sup>55</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

common object—a spectacle—of the shared condition of alienation. Its politics are concerned with bridging social distances. Critiques of technology that insist on diagnosing our social situation with a central problematic of alienation have misunderstood the source of the symptoms they report (or, in truth, the mistake is in the idea of a source altogether). Fundamentally, the generalized critique of alienation remains within a schema of distance (as well as difference and alterity)—a schema that digital technology, and the virulence of a globalization which ceaselessly renders all entities inter-connected, have all but annihilated. The issue today is not one of distance and disconnection, but just the opposite: we are overwhelmed by closeness and transparency. We are absolutely gorged with the conditions of social solidarity and cohesion. And yet they are always just ever so slightly out of arm's reach. The material and technical conditions for de-alienated society are present, yet the idea itself remains somehow in the realm of the impossible. Sociality is systematically dangled as a carrot that ironically tends to reproduce the conditions of alienation. The political concern here is, therefore, not one of social disconnect and alienation, but rather of the overload (and overproduction) of social information. Thus, a shift from the politics of distance (and alienation) to the politics of hyper-proximity ought to take place. *Alienation has given way to contagion; the spectacle has given way to the virus.*

Today, we face a global technological proximity to one another that lends itself politically not to revolution but to constant viral infiltration. We can no longer point toward concentrations of repressive power—on the level of class or of the individual (the sovereign)—with much confidence, that is, without distracting from the deeper systemic and totalizing constellations of control. Power is no longer simply the tool of political,

economic, and theological discursive masters, but rather a force of its own virulent expansion in constant flux, yet also in fractal implosive division. In this metastable form, power itself behaves as a virus: its self-reproduction is always entangled in a process of violent reconstitution and virulent proliferation. Yet it is never fully liquidated or redistributed, only reconcentrated. It is no coincidence that the word virus is etymologically derived from the Latin *vir* (as in *virility*), a root which refers to a constellation of signs revolving around masculinity, force, strength, and most notably, *power*.<sup>56</sup>

When developed on the basis of alleviating alienation for some recovery/discovery of authentic social relations, even the most well-intentioned critiques of new social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter tend to obscure a central mechanism in the functionality of those very networks. The online social network functions successfully by way of a series of constructed desires for authentic social being: desires for a sense of place and meaning in the social whole. A politics of revealing and alleviating alienation is rendered more or less futile if only because the desire for alleviation is a predominant reason people use networks like Facebook to begin with. It is no coincidence that Facebook's public relations strategies and slogans are always centered on one platform: connectivity. Behind the slogan, "Facebook is a social utility that connects you with the people around you," there is the unconscious, "You are alienated, let Facebook help." Just as Coca-Cola is the beverage that makes you thirstier, Facebook is the connective social

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<sup>56</sup> "Etymology of Vir," *Wiktionary: A Wiki-Based Open Content Dictionary*, July 2015, [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/vir#Etymology\\_3](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/vir#Etymology_3).

instrument that makes you feel more socially disconnected.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the *production of disconnectivity*, or at least the reproduction of the signs of disconnectivity, are central to Facebook's strategy of achieving more demand for the production (and consumption) of a connective real. Conveniently, Facebook's design is engulfed in an ecology of advertising which, in addition, stimulates and motivates material production/consumption alongside a reproduction of the real.

There is a self-contained/self-referential logic at work here, and a very productive one at that. Alienation is not simply an unfortunate byproduct of "the network society"<sup>58</sup> or some recent technological progress in relation to which we need to rethink/reprogram or adjust, but rather something that is ideologically reproduced within it in order to ensure its own existence and the self-propagation of networks such as Facebook. As is the case in Althusser's theory of the reproduction of capital, this is an ideological effect that is reproduced within a closed circuit, and not one which is externally imposed.<sup>59</sup> In other words, alienation is part of the logic of virulence; it is one component of a much broader strategy programmed and operationalized by social networks to ensure their own viral propagation (and by extension, the viral profusion of their contents), as well as to guarantee the constancy of representational accumulation and—as evidenced by the proliferating expenditures of data centers, for example—material accumulation. Alienation thus cannot be a sufficient frame of political resistance because it is co-opted at every

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<sup>57</sup> For one particular recent account of a widespread sentiment, see Stephen Marche, "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?," *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/>.

<sup>58</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). See also Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media* (London: Sage Publications, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London; New York: Verso, 2014).

turn by the logics of virulence. The widespread manufacturing of digital social disconnect/discontent is always coupled with the promise of or desire for the alleviation and reconciliation of that very disconnect/discontent.<sup>60</sup>

Facebook's exponential growth witnessed in the mid-to-late 2000's was a viral phenomenon at least in part thanks to this viral logic. The network's ascent to global hegemony is but one instance of a greater global virulence. As large in scale as it may be, Facebook is perhaps only a microcosm of a greater tendency or principle of the virulent self-propagation of visually oriented social media. And its popularization is perhaps but one manifestation of the implosive kinds of hyper-productivist logics employed throughout the digital cyberscape on a global scale. On the macro level, ideologically presenting itself as an immaterial virtuality or 'virtual reality', the digital reproduces various forms of panicked desire,<sup>61</sup> shaping a collective (yet fragmentary) demand for a system of reference. That is to say, the digital reproduces both a referential demand for grounding in material reality, but also the demand for authentic experience in virtual reality. Each side—the so-called virtual and the real—is involved in *reproducing its own deficit* and thus also the conditions for mutual remedy of those deficits. The brute materiality of the data center reproduces a desire for immateriality and, in turn, the 'cloud' reproduces desire for the security of material reference. Both materiality and immateriality—or more precisely, the ideologically mobilized signs of each—are reproduced through a complex interplay of

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<sup>60</sup> Has this not to some extent always been the case? Does Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* not suggest an originary repressive alienation which is at the functional epicenter of civilization itself? See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Martino Fine Books, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Regarding the topic of panicked desire/panicked production in postmodern, hyper-technologically mediated culture, see Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, *Panic Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Postmodern Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989). See also Arthur Kroker, *The Possessed Individual: Technology and the French Postmodern* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

obscuring and disclosing one another: a mutual reproduction of desire. Materiality and immateriality perhaps do not exist outside of the exchange and circulation of their signs, which mutually reproduce and virulently intensify each other *ideologically* and *representationally*.

The logics of virulent (re)production are wholly indifferent to *where* we look for a referent; whether we look toward so-called virtual-reality/immateriality or toward reality/materiality is of no importance. What is important for the processes of virulent mediatization is simply *that* we look for a referent. This is a key principle. The productivist imperative here is that we assume a need for, or even the existence or possibility of, a visible and determinable referent or system of referentiality. In other words, a (if not the) central functionality of most platforms of efficient digital (re)production—everything from online social media, to archival preservation, to digital film—revolves around the reproduced desire for referentiality. Can anything escape this logic? Are we ever truly outside of representation and the ordering logics of the visual? Moreover, are we not presuming that some sort of truer or more authentic referent lies outside of representation when we try to escape it, resist it, or even theorize its alternatives? Does Baudrillard's 'fourth order', which supposedly marks a transition from representation to simulation, fall into this trap?<sup>62</sup> Or does it offer a way out of our imprisonment by the imperatives of representation?

To bracket this issue for now and return to the particular issue of social

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<sup>62</sup> As for the question of whether the fourth order marks a transition or greater abstraction away from the logics of representation, Baudrillard himself is a bit ambiguous. After all, he theorized simulation/simulacra concomitantly with his initial development of the first three orders. The fourth order did not come until later. See Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993), 50. Regarding his eventual formulation of the fourth order, see Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

virtuality/reality which is so well encapsulated by Facebook's design, the point is this: for digital technology, alienation has been rendered but one component of a functional whole. It has been stripped of its radical historical and political emancipatory potential by means of systemic fragmentation, strategic individuation, and electronic abstraction from material labor and class. Online, alienation appears now only as a weakened image of its historical form—a floating simulacrum with no object or objective, and no clear proletariat in sight. The threat of social and political revolution by means of collective (class) consciousness has become effectively regulated by a simulatory exchange, whereby the impulses of revolution/liberation/emancipation are enveloped by their own signs, and endlessly remediated and reshaped by a fragmented left. Revolution is rendered yet another dangling carrot, reduced to one of many mechanisms of ensuring the status quo of network society in late capitalism, and a guarantor of the virulent growth of an incomprehensibly dense field of imminent crises and catastrophes. This logic is one which suspends and maintains all tensions, and also ceaselessly reproduces the conditions necessary for those tensions to remain in a state of metastability.

In this peculiar way, new social media deal with the problem of alienation much like the vaccination of a disease: by introducing a weak or dead version of the microbe (alienation) into a system in order to stimulate an immunity response remembered by the system in case of future threat.<sup>63</sup> If history could not transcend alienation, perhaps Facebook has stabilized it. Paradoxically, the viral is combated with a virus—but a weak one, perhaps with the least possible malice (that is, the least possible malice for those with

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<sup>63</sup> Again, this has Esposito written all over it. However, in this context, I do not consider vaccination/inoculation as an inherently biopolitical concern, but I do believe it is very much a viral one.

certain geographical, racial, and economic privilege). And with nearly all recent developments in digital social technology, this auto-immunity analogy rings true: if the dawn of a consumer Internet (what may retrospectively be called a “Web 1.0”) feared the penetration of networks by viruses, its dusk has given way to a digital epoch in which *the network is itself a virus*.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps this analogy of alienation in relation to a virus has its limits (but does not every analogy have its limits lest it ceases to be an analogy?). The sign ‘alienation’ contains a dense historical manifold of geopolitical and philosophical meanings, experiences, and explications. For this reason, it would be a mistake to think that alienation could so easily be reduced to a pathology or a mere series of emergent symptoms of visual social media in global digital culture. But, to be clear, what is less important here than the concept, experience, or reality of alienation is *its sign*, its representation in myriad manifestations. Alienation is a particular sign that has been immersed in an inter-operable series of variable and seemingly contingent relations within a global digital exchange of other signs. What is of particular import here is that the sign of alienation has long been in exchange and interchange (and probably mutually assured reproduction) with its differential, the sign(s) of connectivity. Moreover, as I have argued, this differential has been operationalized and systematized to the ends and interests of ruthless and implosive productivism. Perhaps it is driven by a principled undercurrent of

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<sup>64</sup> See Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). See also Robert Payne, “VIRALITY 2.0: Networked Promiscuity and the Sharing Subject,” *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 4 (July 2013): 540–560. Lastly, see Tony D. Sampson, “How Networks Become Viral: Three Questions Concerning Universal Contagion,” in *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture*, ed. Jussi Parikka and Tony D. Sampson (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2009), 38–59.

virulence: a force or series of forces, or perhaps an impetus or series of impetuses demanding reference/reality/truth, which drive and reproduce a global political economy of informational flows and the material infrastructures which propagate them. Digital culture is driven by a *principle of virulence*.

To reiterate, I am not concerned with the political problematic of electronic alienation by visual media; nor am I concerned with the task of providing an ethical critique of digital social media geared toward categories of resolution and revolution, solidarity and utopia.<sup>65</sup> The ethical, in this sense, will always be co-opted by the interests or processes of that which provokes ethical critique in the first place. Virulence, like capital, is *amoral*. Thus it has no problem enveloping moral critique or acts of resistance/attempts of transgression into its folds and functions. I am concerned, however, with the mobilization of these concept-signs, and the desires towards which they seemingly gravitate. If there is to be some semblance of hope for the politics of emancipation, it will need to take these processes into account. Perhaps the only liberatory framework that can provide an appropriate response to global virulence is one which first liberates itself from all former political categories; it would need to shed even the historical manifold of 'liberation' altogether. What do/can/ought the politics (or the post-politics?) of global virulence involve?

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<sup>65</sup> This is not to say, however, that it is imperative (or even possible) to avoid altogether normatively/ethically charged language. Such language is, no doubt, inevitably involved in the same virulent circulation of signs as all other forms of signification/expression. Rather, as part of the symptomological diagnostics developed and undertaken herein, I only wish to articulate the profound (and, too often, unacknowledged) limitations of ethical critique. Make no mistake, however: much of this dissertation's topical focus is motivated by normative considerations and worries. That said, my point is not to avoid/censor/disavow the ethical dimension entirely, but to recognize and theorize the ways by which normative critiques of digital technocultural configurations and their social effects are rendered futile by virulent processes. I argue that ethical sensibilities are always already appropriated and undermined by these processes.

#### 4. The Viral Beyond the Visual

Contra Debord and the Situationists, the virus, not the spectacle, is the central 'object' and image of our current techno-social condition. By the same token, virality entails, as I have suggested, a dissolution of centrality altogether. Generally, the virus—whether biological or electronic, 'real' or 'virtual'—implies a fundamental quality of contagion, defined to some extent by its behavior, form, and function. When some entity, object, or image 'goes viral', it spreads between several interconnected yet semi-autonomous (or, at least, generally assumed to be autonomous) points. Just as biological viruses spread between the proximities of bodies immanent within a shared ecosystem, computer viruses spread between the terminal points of electronic networks, between nodes of a shared circuitry. But while these two examples suggest a kind of malice—that is, a threat to the individual subject, or a semi-autonomous point (body, computer, or terminal)—phenomena of *viral media*, on the other hand, at least colloquially, imply a kind of neutrality. They are a form rather than a content. Moreover, they are an *empty form* which produces its very content on the basis of being empty (an extenuation of the Baudrillardian logic of disappearance-proliferation outlined in chapter two). Or, at least, we may say that various forms and contents of electronic media need not be malicious in order to be considered "viral" in recent popular nomenclature. The term "viral media," then, is most commonly referred to as a kind of medium of our digital age. Put simply, virality is the particular way in which information circulates in the current techno-communicative era. Viral media are assumed by a digital quotidian to be part of a normal continuum of technological development. They are distinct but not radically separate from, say, the circulation of texts throughout Europe following the printing press or the circulation of

images following the photograph/camera.

While I think there is good reason for thinking of the digital as part of a continuum of western productivism, ocularcentricity, and representation rather than an emergent or radically contingent rupture in the global techno-social configuration of power, this perspective runs the risk of problematically conceptualizing digital media as a technological pinnacle of liberal democratic progress. It seems that viral media—or the media ecosystems/networks which produce and disseminate them—are often given a distinctive political ontology, whereby their contents are assumed to be more democratic<sup>66</sup> than the spectacular mass media deployments of an earlier informational age (e.g., the infamous gatekeepers, major news conglomerates, and sites of governmental mediation).<sup>67</sup> Viral media may be benign, malignant, or neither. The term “viral media” only denotes a particular modality of the production, consumption, and dissemination of information in the contemporary global(ized) techno-structure, whose circuitry of multitudinous networks and terminals—and the various informational flows throughout that circuitry—form *the appearance* of a neutral substratum. Everything appears neutral because everything has been leveled by/as a global and relentless deluge of informational reproduction. This global situation describes a world in which one encounters everywhere

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<sup>66</sup> See Bruce Simon, “Illegal Knowledge: Strategies for New-Media Activism,” in *The Politics of Information: The Electronic Mediation of Social Change*, ed. Marc Bousquet and Katherine Wills (Stanford, CA: Alt X Press, 2003), 55–65. See also the discussion in Peter Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation,” *Political Communication* 22, no. 2 (April 2005): 147–162. Lastly, see the discussion in Manuel Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society,” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 238–266.

<sup>67</sup> For elaboration on this political naiveté regarding our “contemporary media techniques,” see François Debrix, “International Intersections: An Interview With François Debrix,” *Interstitial: A Journal of Modern Culture and Events* 1 (2013), <http://interstitialjournal.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/debrix-interview.pdf>.

the signs of virality, as well as the virality of signs.

What is called for, perhaps, is a socio-technological analysis and philosophical critique of the current state of affairs within the global circuitry of informational networks beyond the visual, yet also belonging to its legacy (or the hyper-extension of its logics), with an emphasis on modalities of informational flow, representational production, and hyper-communicative exchange. I forward the following thesis: we have moved beyond the techno-logics of the disciplinary society,<sup>68</sup> beyond the society of control,<sup>69</sup> and, today, we may begin to think about the society of virulence. I think that the success of any kind of politics formed around a resistance to decentered domination by a global cybernetic (dis)order—in effect, a new manifestation of what Arendt called “rule by Nobody,” which she argued is “clearly the most tyrannical [rule] of all”<sup>70</sup>—would demand at least a cursory understanding of these logics and their broader historico-philosophical contexts.

The virulent society is one at home within the world of metastability, of suspended and regulated tensions: the stability of instability. For some, it is presumed to be the end of history. At least for those privileged enough to notice the banality of its turn, the empty form of a new millennium brought with it neophilic subjectivities, techno-consumerist gadget fetishism, and the apocalyptic festival of real-time globalized media. Yet, no apocalypse occurred (at least, not one which can be clearly perceived)—only the sustained feedback amplification of a global cybernetic virulence. Here, all tensions are systemically preserved; and all resolutions (and revolutions) are mediatically individuated, localized, and dramatized. At least in terms of international relations, one need not look much further

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<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>69</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (January 1, 1992): 3–7.

<sup>70</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 38.

than the simulacral theater of recent (2014) post-soviet tensions (particularly between Ukraine and Russia) to see the metastable form in action. It is particularly evident, for example, in the western media's obsession with the anachronistic power-politics of Putin. What Joe Biden ostracized as an outdated, old-world sovereign "land grab"<sup>71</sup> suggests little to none of the weight of the twentieth-century's dialectical uncertainty about the future global orientation of socio-cultural-economic reality. The historical dialectic between the east and the west is preserved, but only as a shell of its former self. This hollowed dialectic is revisited only on the level of recycled signs and/as simulation. The mediatic compulsion to project onto present-day Russian relations anachronistic east-west tensions does not express or reflect the possibilities of historical transfiguration, but rather it serves as an expression of the generalized desire for historical transfiguration after it no longer seems possible. Indeed, the so-called end of history has several geopolitical contours worth outlining.

The situation of virulence is one of control without centrality,<sup>72</sup> of an increasingly global metastability, a world in which we wait in vain for the rupture, the turn, the future, the Event, always sensing that it is just around the corner. "*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten.*"<sup>73</sup> We wait for a god, a center, a pre-Copernican (yet curiously also an empirically

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<sup>71</sup> Margaret Talev, "Biden Calls Russia's Move into Crimea a 'Land Grab,'" *Bloomberg*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-18/biden-to-visit-poland-for-ukraine-talks-after-crimea-vote.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Galloway develops this situation as the core of his analysis in Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>73</sup> A difficult sentence to translate, as it has many equiprobable meanings: "Only a(nother) god can save us (now)." Martin Heidegger, "'Only a God Can Save Us': *Der Spiegel's* Interview with Martin Heidegger (1966)," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 107. See also Hubert Dreyfus' explication of this passage and the difficulty of its translation in Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Heidegger on Gaining a Free Relation to Technology," in *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and Alastair Hannay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 104-105.

verifiable) point of reference for Judgment. We are mobilized in all directions toward some illusive point of reference to make sense of our psycho-social reality. "The sole possibility left for us," Heidegger writes, "is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering [*Untergang*]; for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder."<sup>74</sup> But with what substance do we founder when we have lost all centrality, all sense of substance? How can "History" unfold when it is rendered indeterminable and interminable, overwhelmed by the vision of its very unfolding (overwhelmed by its signs)? We may be "gorged with meaning," we may even founder on it—on our own "info-gluttony."<sup>75</sup> But will we sink? Or will we find new ways to breathe? On the implosive global stage of *Untergang*, I wonder, is there even anyone left to drown? Or is there only a series of technical functions, a highly efficient, reckless series of computational means to no particular ends? A total global cybernetics that is hyper-functional in every sense. This last question probes the central question of cybernetics—or rather, perhaps, of the almost omniscient cybernetic virulence in place of actual omniscience, which is capable of not only absorbing human will, but also of utilizing it as a function of its algorithmic operation: the point of Singularity.

If virulence is the defining modality of our time, I suggest that it is crucial to investigate not only its functions and operations, but also where it comes from and how it has reached prominence in everyday language. In the following chapter, I look into the 'virulent function of language', arguing that its root is in language as such. I argue that

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

language is trapped within its own cocoon, so to speak, entirely without an outside. This is the primary precondition—which the west has become all too aware of—for an inevitable, if not destined virulent proliferation of signs and signification. Ultimately, I suggest, this virulence of language has manifested in an overproduction of language so massive it has been forced into smaller and smaller methods of compression, the latest of which we broadly refer to as information.

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## Chapter Four

### The Virulent Function of Language: From Babel to Information

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The view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language—this view, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to survive suspended precisely over this abyss is its task. [...] Or is it, rather, the temptation to place at the outset a hypothesis that constitutes an abyss for all philosophizing?

-Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

Also the destruction of discourse is not simply an erasing neutralization. It multiplies words, precipitates them one against the other, engulfs them too, in an endless and baseless substitution whose only rule is the sovereign affirmation of the play outside meaning. Not a reserve or a withdrawal, not the infinite murmur of a blank speech erasing the traces of classical discourse, but a kind of potlach of signs that burns, consumes, and wastes words in the gay affirmation of death: a sacrifice and a challenge.

-Jacques Derrida<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. The Outside of Language

Language, or what is most commonly thought of as the distinctively human means/precondition of communication (written or spoken), must always contend with a great abyss. This is even more so the case for linguistic theory, at least insofar as it takes language to be its object and, at the same time, its medium. To claim with Benjamin that language necessarily faces a void is to say, ultimately, that there can be no real 'outside' of language—no external vantage point from which to observe and understand it—because linguistic understanding can only take the form of language itself. Everything we know or can know is always already thoroughly saturated by language and signification. Language

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock and Michael William Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London; NY: Routledge, 2005), 347.

pervades everything knowable, itself being no exception. As Benjamin put it in his 1916 essay, "On Language as Such," "We cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything."<sup>3</sup>

It is unlikely that Heidegger read Benjamin's essay, but the parallels between it and his 1950 lecture on "Language" are striking. Just as Benjamin envisaged a "great abyss" over which linguistic theory remains suspended, Heidegger imagines an abyss of language over which we hover:

We speak of an abyss where the ground falls away, [...] where we seek the ground and set out to arrive at a ground, to get to the bottom of something. [...] The sentence, "Language is language," leaves us to hover over an abyss as long as we endure what it says. [...] If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man.<sup>4</sup>

The tautology "language is language" gives a sense of void for Heidegger because it reveals the irreducibility of language as such. From the perspective of a linguistic theorist, perhaps, the sentence is vertiginous because it seems to express the impossibility of locating the truth of language somewhere outside it. The moment one looks to language as being anything but self-reflexive/self-expressive, one finds oneself hovering over a void, suspended above the empty exterior of language, but also immersed in an abundance of its signification.

Synonymous with the claim that there is no outside of language, one may say that *nothing* is the outside of language. That is to say, language *does* have an outside:

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, "Language as Such," 62.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), 189.

nothingness.<sup>5</sup> This, I believe, is what Benjamin and Heidegger alike saw as the abyss over which linguistics constantly hovers, or as I have put it, the void with which language must always contend. Language has an Other, at least in its own negative image: a radical alterity to which linguistic analysis must respond or otherwise ignore entirely, acting as if the privileged position of the scientific subject were somehow outside language peering in. On the one hand, if it chooses to respond, linguistic theory risks becoming an exercise in pure self-reflexivity, consigned to what may at the outset resemble chasing its own tail in circles.<sup>6</sup> If, on the other hand, linguistic analysis ignores the abyss over which it hovers, it does so necessarily, as Nietzsche seemed to intuit, in a kind of bad faith.<sup>7</sup> It retains, in other words, some operative sense (however aware or unaware) that an understanding of language is to be found independent of language itself; it externalizes the referent of language.<sup>8</sup> This latter course is, from my understanding, the predominant modality in the multifarious field of linguistics today, whereby the study of language survives mostly by becoming augmented by some external field of reference. Hence, there occurs an emergence and formalization of several hybridizations throughout the twentieth century, such as *psycholinguistics*, *sociolinguistics*, *biolinguistics*, *neurolinguistics*, etc. These hybrid fields reflect more than interdisciplinary methodologies: they typify the need to

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<sup>5</sup> More recently, see Eugene Thacker's views in Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy, Vol. 1* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most brilliant example of this is found in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Has this been the project of deconstruction in a nutshell? Namely, to challenge a tradition whose terms are so all-pervasive and seemingly universal (e.g. ocularcentrism, logocentrism, etc.) that one cannot forge the challenge without them? See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> "This need to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of *ressentiment*." Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> Then again, are not all referents externalizations? In other words, are not all referents part and parcel of a dynamic will to locate (and represent) the meaning of something in some exteriority?

develop an understanding of language by locating it outside of itself.<sup>9</sup> If the former course of self-reflexivity risks an immobile circularity, or 'never getting anywhere', then the latter risks hyperextension and proliferation—and endless chain of signs and referents.

But, in truth, both directions of linguistic theory risk, nay, are *destined* to a trajectory of proliferation. After all, chasing one's own tail in writing produces text, and thus would presumably belong to the same productivist metaphysics as any other logocentric activity. Here it may be useful to pause in order to articulate a hypothesis not yet formalized, but which nevertheless has been implicitly developing throughout the preceding chapters: the destined operation of language is to proliferate and saturate. Thus, language recalls (and over time reasserts) the destiny of the virus. If biological life evolved from an originary *mimetic* orientation characterized by genetic self-propagation and gradual augmentation (viral replication) to the eventual *sexual* orientation of dualistic propagation of species (animal reproduction), then mammalian language and communication may provide a living memory of the former, of life's mimetic origins. The virulence of language, that is, could be some reactivated remnant of a (biologically) viral past. Or, to pose an equally speculative hypothesis, language pulls us toward its inarticulable past—toward the void which precedes it—in an eternal recurrence of the same: "a circular movement of absolutely identical series [...] *ad infinitum*."<sup>10</sup> "For Nietzsche," Tracy Strong argues, "it is not that we are bound by our language, but that we are in effect defined by our chains. Without the

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<sup>9</sup> One of the most (in)famous and historically significant examples of this is Noam Chomsky's influential structural linguistics in *Syntactic Structures* (first published in 1957), which arguably germinated the demand in North American linguistics for locating a biological language faculty. See Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, 2nd ed. (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. R.J Hollingdale and Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 549.

fetters of our language [...] there would be nothing and no one at all."<sup>11</sup> In other words, human reality itself is reducible only to language. Without language, reality ceases to be real. Is this the root (or rootlessness) of language's virulence? If there can be nothing outside the domain of language, then existence itself—indeed, reality as we know—is coded by our grammar. "Without language, without the ability to formulate the world, all would appear as it does to an infant, the play and chaos of an unending river which is never twice the same."<sup>12</sup> Is this the magical imperative tract of language: to make the real manifest out of nothing? Or, at least, to forge the bearings of humanity in a world without grounding? To forge some degree of consistent and static 'truth' out of the unnameable/unknowable chaos of whatever lies beyond the reach of words? Perhaps language, always identical to itself and only itself, always self-referential and autological, somehow constitutes the world (through our linguistic representation<sup>13</sup> of it) as something that appears and disappears in a perpetual interplay of proliferation-absence: "It maintains itself in both.— It lives on itself: its excrements are its food."<sup>14</sup>

That language, broadly construed (but especially in the form of writing/text), behaves virally or shares some fundamental characteristics with the microbial virus is by no means a new theoretical consideration, nor a hypothesis unique to this project. Jacques Derrida, for example, once said in an interview that his work (on language) was "dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a *virology*, the

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<sup>11</sup> Tracy B. Strong, "Language and Nihilism: Nietzsche's Critique of Epistemology," *Theory and Society* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1976), 241.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>13</sup> See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 548.

virus of many things.”<sup>15</sup> The figure of the virus “dominates” language.<sup>16</sup> In Neal Stephenson’s cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*, the virus is described as a kind of perennial figure, deeply and mysteriously rooted in the history and pre-history of language all the way back to the mythos of Babel.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, William Burroughs theorized that the written word is “literally a virus that made [the] spoken word possible.”<sup>18</sup> Like a kind of genetic code, written language determines the life of spoken language. “The word has not been recognized as a virus,” he claims, “because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Burroughs means to suggest that language is an important dimension of metastasis, the virulent outgrowth of something made possible by its relationship to a host. The human creature only serves as a host for the virulent reproduction of the language-virus. Its fate is secondary to the virulent replication of language.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout a range of postmodern/poststructural thought, one can clearly see that there exist theoretical foundations for some resemblance between language and the virus/virality. But, on the other hand, I think we should also avoid grounding the meaning of language entirely in the referential figure of the virus, lest we risk obscuring the potentially non-referential (self-referential?) character of language as such—its contention, in other words, with radical absence—which, I argue, gives language its virulent

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<sup>15</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida” in Peter Brunette and David Wills, eds., *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12. [Emphasis added].

<sup>16</sup> See also Thierry Bardini, “Hypervirus: A Clinical Report,” *CTheory*, 1000 Days of Theory, February 2, 2006, [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=504](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=504).

<sup>17</sup> Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (Ubu Classics, 2005), 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> See also William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (New York: Grove Press, 1992).

function in the first place. To claim language is a virus may have value as a theoretical construction, or as a kind of metonymic structure, but it should not distract the attention of our analysis away from the *fundamental lack* that enables the virulent function of language. The difficult conceptual task at hand, which is also a Heideggerian challenge, is to maintain that there is no substance, no essence, and no spirit beneath language, driving it toward a destiny of greater and greater proliferation. Thus, this analysis opts not for the figure of the virus, but for a theoretical principle of virulence in linguistic theory. *There is no virus, and this is precisely why it behaves virulently.* Our analysis favors symptomology over reality/referentiality. If there was such a great actor behind the history of human language, it would risk diversion or interruption and thus cease to be destiny. It is precisely the contrary that happens: language proliferates indeterminably because and *only* because it has no such actor, no identifiable/localizable virion, and thus no such risk of diversion. The abyss always lurking underneath language—the radical absence of anything outside it—is the only guarantee that language will proliferate. “The predestination of language [is] to become nonsense from the instant it is caught in its own devices.”<sup>21</sup> This ironic destiny of language, then, is that its proliferation is driven by only its essential lack: a lack which is essential only because language lacks essence, and equally paradoxically, one which drives the virulent production of signification only because language lacks inherent drive. This is the root of its virulence. Just as utopia literally means that which is *no-place*, destiny is that which is *no-time*. It is, after all, the very absence, or impossibility, of utopia which accelerates us toward its horizon, producing a series of historical effects and social formations along the way.

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (NY: Semiotext(e), 1988), 84.

Without an outside of language (or with nothing/ness as its outside), linguistic understanding is always confined to a hall of mirrors, so to speak. The study of language and linguistic communication—at least, the philosophical variety which has some awareness or consideration of its own abyss—cannot help being entirely self-referential, reducible only to itself: “Language is language.” This tautology was not a logical problem for Heidegger but, rather, the only legitimate starting point for thinking about language as such. “Merely to say the identical thing twice,” he rhetorically asks, “how is that supposed to get us anywhere? But we do not want to get anywhere. We would like only, for once, to get to just where we are already.”<sup>22</sup> That is, according to Heidegger, our analysis would like to stay within the cocoon of language as such (as if there was even a possible alternative).

In this chapter, I attempt to uphold the theoretical commitment to getting “to just where we are already” by navigating the tricky refusal of exterior referentiality (although, to some extent, it seems that grammar will always betray this). I maintain that the irreducibility of language (its rootlessness) is paradoxically the root of its virulence. The following pages explore the notion that written and spoken language alike behave with (re)productive virality. I pose the concept of virulence as a prevalent characteristic and tendency of historical linguistic evolutionary change, but also as a central operational core of language as such. The following pages avoid ontologizing language by trying to ground it in the ‘nature’ of the virus, or by trying to provide a figurative analogy for it (to whatever extent that is possible). But, by the same token, I also wish to avoid forwarding a purely self-referential and/or deconstructive account of language. Rather, this chapter remains in aporia about the nature and naturelessness of language, which to some extent affords it

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<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, “Language,” 188.

the opportunity to describe its aporetic functions and virulent effects, particularly as they relate to (and help cultivate) digital culture. The concern with language herein is perennial, but only insofar as a continuum of representation runs from antiquity to the digital (as discussed in the previous chapter in the context of ocularcentric media). The viral destiny of language—the totality of its accumulative and globalizing effects—constitutes, or at least renders possible, the emergence of the digital. The destiny of language is *information*.

By at least the time of supposed modernity, the collective use of language to communicate meaning—generally speaking, the entire linguistic and epistemological legacy of the west with its “wager on representation”<sup>23</sup>—reached a peak in its historical crescendo. Aided by technological developments like the printing press, this point in the development of language witnessed (and continues to witness) a thorough profusion of meaning in all cultural and existential domains. Representational language acts as the *Primum Mobile* of all human reason—the tendency of language to try to fill every ontological and theological crevice, to solder itself to every exposed or vulnerable area of human experience, to ceaselessly illuminate the entire world with meaning. This is the virulent function of language I wish to explicate, and the operational productivist principle I wish to explore.

Language impossibly (yet all too successfully) seeks to transgress the prohibitive limits of whatever domain it encounters. No matter how irreducible to linguistic representation a referential experience/object/subject seems, it will eventually be named, appropriated by some vector of power, violently articulated and virulently rearticulated

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 10-11.

until all that remains are its mere signs in exchange: pure information. Nothing truly resists the metastases of words; likewise, nothing escapes the ceaseless will to knowledge/representation. Eventually, all must be absorbed into (digital) communication and encapsulated by information—the indeterminable and aporia-inducing outgrowth of the virulence of language. All will eventually become a sacrifice to the representational edifice of language, subject to the hyper-efficient functioning of digital culture's well-oiled productivist network machinery. Long before the human became lost in the expansive momentum of Moore's law—which posits the exponential growth of technological change in the digital era of informational computation<sup>24</sup>—s/he had already dissolved into language: metabolized and incorporated into a swarm of signs.

## **2. The Proliferation of “Mere Signs”**

With the sign playing such a central role in this project (and the history of linguistic theory in general), it is important to make a few notes at the outset regarding its background and ambiguity, as well as what can be meant by the term and how it is being mobilized here. While the latter concern was largely addressed in the development of a Baudrillardian approach to digital analysis in chapter two, a sufficient and explicit outline of the sign outside of poststructural/postmodern contexts has yet to be provided. Given the ambiguity of the term and the radically different variations in which it has been theoretically deployed, the task of providing such an outline must remain incomprehensive and in some way incomplete. Moreover, the task here is *not* to render a more comprehensive understanding of the sign in semiotics. Such a task is a project in itself,<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Hossein Bidgoli, ed., *The Internet Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 12.

<sup>25</sup> For example of one such project, see Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

and thus beyond the scope of this chapter. The task, rather, is to problematize the sign within the context of its virulence—that is, to avoid delimiting the sign, forcing it between preconfigured conceptual boundaries, or assigning it meaning in reference to domains outside itself. Thus, the task is to allow the sign to reveal itself not as a substance or concept, but as *a mere sign*, free-floating<sup>26</sup> and untethered from its supposed referents in the world of objects, and to take inventory of its virulent functions and effects. To some extent, I began taking this inventory in the previous chapter, but there the sign was only a peripheral consideration to the visual image (and, more generally, to representation).

What is more interesting and pertinent here than developing an epistemology of the linguistic sign is developing a theory which can give an account, at least in part, of the *actualization* of such an epistemology, that is to say, a theory which observes, traces, and speculates on the implications and linguistic effects of representational epistemology, but does so without the aim of displacing it with some alternative model. Thus, the claim “language is virulent” does not displace the claim “language is representational.” Instead, it points out a function of language rooted in a particular mode (representation) which has over-accumulated to such an extent that it is no longer extricable from reality. As I have used the term thus far, the sign is the central figure (and perhaps primary functor) of this linguistic over-accumulation.

Although most often a category of language, the sign is not always an exclusive concept belonging to the field of linguistics. Likewise, it is not necessarily reducible to the

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<sup>26</sup> See Baudrillard's notion of “the flotation of signs” in Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993), 92.

written or spoken word.<sup>27</sup> Most broadly, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign is something which stands in for something else, whether it is a word, an image, or a sound.<sup>28</sup> Allegedly, it is always outside of itself as a functor of representation. In some of the earliest modern semiotic theory, the sign is conceptualized as a neutral figure—it has no real meaning outside of human investment and interpretation. It remains, if you recall from chapter two, within the purview of the first or second order of simulation.<sup>29</sup> For Peirce, “Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign.”<sup>30</sup> It is a kind of blank plasticity, the constitution of which is relegated to the task of the interpreter, or at least, to the encounter with the world by which the sign is *assigned* its meaning. In becoming arbitrarily attached, as it were, to some thing, object, or expression, the sign is given its status as such. The sign is thus, at least by some consideration, properly virtual: it is immaterial and unlocalizable but nevertheless real.<sup>31</sup> The sign is perhaps most importantly and originally a *matter of meaning and meaning making*: a kind of non-object or no-thing which the faculty of human language (and the capacity for communication that it allegedly affords), as part and parcel of the broader capacity for representational knowledge and language writ large, is presumed capable of manifesting, shaping, and instrumentally employing in various ways in order to make meaning of itself and the world. The drive for meaning is absolutely central to the concept of the sign.

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<sup>27</sup> Although in my usage, the terms ‘word’ and ‘sign’ are used somewhat interchangeably. At least for the kind of linguistic theory explored herein, the word (whether spoken or written) is the most important type of sign.

<sup>28</sup> Charles S Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 99.

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Charles S. Peirce, Paul Weiss, and Charles Hartshorne, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 2 (London: Belknap Press of Harvard U.P, 1931), 302.

<sup>31</sup> See Deleuze on the concept of “the virtual” in Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

To be clear, however, I do not mean to concede to an anthropocentric understanding of the sign (nor of language and communication in general) as some instrument of meaning-making, nor to the myriad epistemological/ontological assumptions which have historically attempted to ground it in various sub-fields of philosophy and linguistics. I only wish to point out the consequences and effects of its predominance. Moreover, I want to suggest that this conception of the sign has historically been and continues to be—however explicit or implicit—an essential part of the most central understanding of language and meaning in western civilization. This broader central understanding to which I refer is, of course, the edifice of western representation, which has been hyper-deployed/hyper-extended so thoroughly and perfectly that it exceeds its very definition, and thereby forms the impenetrably dense historical manifold of accumulated language that is today conceived of as information.

It would be a crude misunderstanding, however, to think that the hyper-deployment of representation across time and space means that a representational view of language has been uniformly adopted throughout all linguistic theory (and more specifically, all semiotic theory). On the contrary, it seems that much of twentieth century philosophical thought and structuralist linguistic theory has been motivated precisely by a *negation* or rejection of a purely representational view of language and the sign. We have already briefly seen how, for instance, Heidegger and Benjamin try to disavow language from representation. This is a sentiment which stretches well beyond the context of twentieth-century German thought. The struggle for a non-representational theory of language (and also more generally, of meaning and technology) remains contemporary.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For example, through utilizing several theoretical contributions from Gabriel Tarde and Deleuze, Tony Sampson attempts to develop a non-representational technological understanding of virality,

Saussure's theory of the sign—what he hoped would crystalize into a science of *semiology*—is exemplary in regard to resisting the representational function. Contra Peirce, Saussure's analytical starting point is the *linguistic* sign rather than the sign that stands in for (represents) something other than itself. Furthermore, Saussure seems to oppose the instrumental-representational view of language on several counts. Most notably, he gives a prolific account of the autonomy, or at least semi-autonomy, of language, stating that “the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of society: that is its essential nature, even though it may be by no means obvious at first sight.”<sup>33</sup> This is an early key insight into the virulent function of language, albeit one which may confuse the sign's lack of an essential nature as its very nature. Regardless, that the sign is elusive is crucial to our analysis and understanding of language as such.

Saussure's semiology does not stay within the self-reflexive boundaries of language, however. Although language remains his primary focus, Saussure argues that “if one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind.”<sup>34</sup> His understanding of the sign thus reaches beyond language “by considering rites, customs, etc., as signs.”<sup>35</sup> For Saussure, signs are composed of two psycho-social (and somewhat abstract)

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accessing a “deeper level” of ‘subrepresentative’ material flows.” Where my project differs is in the consideration that virulence is itself the result of representation—it is, in other words, an effect or characteristic of *hyper-representation*, and thus does not focus on some sub-representational/non-representational content (which is not to say that such content does not exist). Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 8. An additional example of the contemporary struggle for a non-representational language is Scott Lash's *Critique of Information*. He claims that “what is needed is a break with representational modes of signification for non-representational, dialogic modes.” Scott Lash, *Critique of Information, Theory, Culture & Society* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2002), 80.

<sup>33</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1986), 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

components: a "signifier" and a "signified." He refers to the signified as a "concept" and the signifier as "a sound pattern," which he clarifies is not to be conflated with a physical or objective sound, but "the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses."<sup>36</sup> In this way, Saussure's theory of the sign seems to presume an empirics of impression, that is to say, an epistemological model not altogether different from that of David Hume, whereby knowledge about the 'real world' of objects is impressed upon, or reflected by, impressions within the individual's psyche.<sup>37</sup> Saussure seems to bracket the issue of referentiality, however, avoiding altogether the question of how objects and impressions reflect one another. In other words, there is no inherent referential or representative function involved in his dual conception of a sign's mechanics. He famously claims (in partial agreement with Peirce): "*The linguistic sign is arbitrary.*"<sup>38</sup>

For Saussure, the primary function of the sign, therefore, is not to represent the objective world or reference subjects/objects within it. Nor is it to represent psycho-social reality in the modality of linguistic human expression. Rather, he is concerned with semi-independent linguistic structures, abstracted from the function of reference and the entire field of referentiality. As Kaja Silverman articulates, Saussure's "*Course in General Linguistics* has nothing whatever to say [...] about the connection [...] between sign and referent."<sup>39</sup> According to Saussure, the tendency to equate the sign with reference and language with representation belongs to "a superficial view taken by the general public,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>37</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>38</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 10.

which sees a language merely as a nomenclature."<sup>40</sup> He seems to reject a representational view of the sign as a vulgar quotidian perspective on language. While the linguistic sign may be involved in processes of representation, he admits, it need not always be involved in representation of the objective real. A sign functions in a complex structure or system of other signs not limited by the function of naming or 'standing in'. Saussure seems to focus on signification as something that involves a chain of signs which form scientifically knowable and coherent systems. But does this perspective preclude all types of referential/representational functionality? Or, on the other hand, does it preclude only the function that has to do with the world of objects? The structuralist perspective here would seem to suggest that a modality of representation/referentiality is indeed active, not between signs and objects, or words and things, but between signs and other signs: inner and inter-systemic referential relationships between contents of variant (yet overlapping/parallel) sign systems. This inter-referentiality between signs is but one short step away from describing the operations of Baudrillard's simulacra.<sup>41</sup> If the sign was tethered to a definite object, or if it was tethered to some corporeal facet of the real, it would remain static in meaning. Because it is so variable, and because language is reducible only to language (Heidegger), the sign loses its ties to the supposedly substantive real and the world of objects. It becomes a "mere sign," to borrow Benjamin's term, a stand in for nothing in particular (and thus, also, a potential a stand in for everything).<sup>42</sup> The sign is substantively and referentially empty outside the fact of other signs. The Saussurean model implies an indefinite capacity for a sign vis-à-vis other

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<sup>40</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> See Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 324; 328.

signs, and thus a capacity for, if not the inevitability of, their proliferation. For this reason, as I return below, Saussure's model of language is a precursor to information and its proliferation throughout network society.

The emptiness of the mere sign is symptomatic of what Benjamin criticizes as "the bourgeois conception of language."<sup>43</sup> For Benjamin, this view of language is impoverished, invalid, and inconceivable. It tends to reduce language to a functional utility, a mere means employed by the detached Cartesian subject.<sup>44</sup> Benjamin seems to suggest that this conception of language tends to obscure the deeper (or perhaps 'higher') ontological and theological meanings of language. He writes that the bourgeois view "holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, its addressee a human being. The other conception of language, in contrast, knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in naming the mental being of man communicates itself to God.*"<sup>45</sup> Thus, for Benjamin, language is not simply about the accuracy of representation or the communicative transfer of positive knowledge from one subject to the next. Rather, the idiosyncrasy of the *human act of naming* is such that it affords communion with God. "It aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth."<sup>46</sup> Because God created the world, His word speaks through it in a kind of or pure language. Counterintuitively, this language is non-auditory, comprising "the communicating muteness of things (animals)."<sup>47</sup> For Benjamin, unlike Saussure, there is no such thing as an arbitrary sign. He

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<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, "On Language as Such," 318; 324. However, to be clear, Benjamin does not use the language of symptomology to describe his notion of mere signs.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 326.

rejects the idea that “the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some conventions.”<sup>48</sup> In order to avoid the arbitrariness of the sign, perhaps, Benjamin has to evoke a divine presence. Without it, all signs would be the “mere signs” of man.

Benjamin’s critique throws out the fundamentals of semiotic thought for what one might call an onto-theological perspective on language. Moreover, his analysis seems to emphasize the concept of the “name” over that of the “sign.” This is not to say the sign plays no role in Benjamin’s theory of language, however. For him, God bestows man with the function of naming things (and people) via human language. “God gives each beast in turn a sign, whereupon they step before man to be named.”<sup>49</sup> Naming is here a matter of **assigning**. The sign, in other words, is not thought by Benjamin to be a product of human speech (that, it seems, would constitute a “mere sign”); rather, the sign is something exterior to the breadth of human language, signified by God himself. Benjamin attempts to rescue the sign from the imperfect, self-referential enclosure of human representation. Human language is rooted in a kind of access to pure language/knowledge (the language of God and signification of the world itself), which can be traced by human language via translation (of scripture, in particular). All translation, he argues, is reducible to a series of *transformations* from an original purity or divinity: “Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity.”<sup>50</sup> Put differently, translation is not simply a representational utility, but one with profound theological potentiality. He continues:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 325.

The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge. The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed by God. For God created things; the creative word in them is **the germ** of the cognizing name, just as God, too, finally named each thing after it was created. But obviously this naming is only an expression of the identity of the creative word and the cognizing name in God, not the prior solution of the task that God expressly assigns to man himself: that of naming things. In receiving the unspoken nameless language of things and converting it by name into sounds, man performs this task.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, all human naming is translation/transformation of and from some purer originality.<sup>52</sup>

The name for an object, animal, or phenomenon is given by the human languages, not by arbitrary assignment of sign, but through variable translations of that which is (by all conventional standards) non-linguistic/non-communicable. Benjamin writes, "For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable."<sup>53</sup> Language must always contend with its abyss perhaps because it *symbolizes* it at the very same time it constitutes its opposite; language is always a symbol of its own alterity. Language is thus necessarily locked in perpetual, irreconcilable confrontation with its Other because it is (or, at least, may be) a symbol of the latter.

At least for Benjamin, the non-communicable/non-linguistic/sub-linguistic abyss of language is the word of God in its purest form, that is to say, the irreducible immediacy which human language encounters and, by naming it, also formatively (re)produces anew. For Benjamin, the human act of naming has a mimetic function. As Brian Britt puts it, "the mimesis of pure language relates human to God, not word to object."<sup>54</sup> From

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 327. [Emphasis Added].

<sup>52</sup> See also See Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, 1st ed. (Schocken, 1969).

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, "On Language as Such," 331.

<sup>54</sup> Brian M. Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 37.

Benjamin's perspective, naming the world of things is therefore not about assigning its signs, but about establishing communion with God. The namer encounters the word of God in the natural world—the domain of incommunicability—and mimetically copies it in signification.<sup>55</sup> Presumably, this process (which Benjamin seems to think is fundamentally a process of translation/transformation) is *mimetic* because it aims to copy the abysmal domain of incommunicability in and as communication. But because this is impossible, it always creates a transformation/mutation, always some byproduct effect: mere signs, and perhaps also names, come to constitute memes.<sup>56</sup> Thus Benjamin's concept of the name may be quite different from that of, say, Nietzsche, who wrote that originality is "to see something that still has no name; that still cannot be named even though it is lying right before everyone's eyes." He continues, "The way people usually are, it takes a name to make something visible at all. –Those with originality have usually been the name-givers."<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche's namer is sovereign and original—perhaps a stand-in for an absent God. The figure of the namer in Benjamin is not sovereign per se but rather, in effect, a witness: someone who attests to the *sovereignty of God through human speech*. The quality of originality that Nietzsche ascribes the "name-givers" would perhaps for Benjamin be the human capacity for "higher language" and, through it, communion with God. For the latter, the ability to see that which has no name, to name it, translate it, and

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<sup>55</sup> See also Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 333-336.

<sup>56</sup> By "meme" I mean to refer to a basic unit of mimetic (re)production. Relatively recently, Richard Dawkins outlined the form and function of bio-cultural memes/memetics (albeit toward rather narrow ends and misguided cultural critiques). In particular, see Richard Dawkins, "Viruses of the Mind," 1991, <http://www.inf.fu-berlin.de/lehre/pmo/eng/Dawkins-MindViruses.pdf>. See also Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 151.

thus transform it, is not a mark of the namer's originality, but a testament to their encounter with the pure originality and immediacy of Creation. Benjamin's hope, it seems, is that human language can still encounter the immediacy of nature, of things, in such a way as to ascend, as he puts it, "into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere."<sup>58</sup>

It seems that Benjamin wants to argue that human language becomes a matter of mere signs once this immediacy is somehow forgotten or broken. Language is knocked down from its higher functioning, reduced to contemporary "chatter" (*Geschwätz*).<sup>59</sup> If for much of Baudrillard's thought (and more generally, poststructural thought) the sign is found detached from its referential object, in Benjamin's essay the *mere sign* is one which has been abstracted from Referentiality as such, that is to say, from God Himself. This is the state of the Fall, to some extent, when "man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete, name, and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle."<sup>60</sup> Benjamin claims the Fall (of language) is when and where "the word must communicate *something* (other than itself). [...] The word as something externally communicating, as it were a parody by the expressly mediate word of the expressly immediate, the creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful."<sup>61</sup> Supposedly after the Fall, human language becomes the man-made stuff of parodic representation and signification. *Mere signs* proliferate when the word of man becomes a bastardized image of the word of God.

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<sup>58</sup> Benjamin, "On Language as Such," 330.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 153.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, "On Language as Such," 328.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

This imperative of language to mediate in perpetual reference to, and in constant communication of, some externality is a central component of its virulent function. It is by virtue of these general demands on language that it comes to be over-produced and over-signified; mere signs proliferate in all directions. Moreover, those signs become hyper-referential to one another, no longer (and probably never) dependent on some actual exterior object-referent. After the supposed Fall of man, representational language sinks its teeth into the world. Through mere signs, language hereby seeks to represent, mirror, reflect, or become identical/similar to a noncommunicable/nonverbal external nature. But because this externality is irreducible to language, *it is also its alterity*. The project is never complete: language is ceaselessly disappointed by its inability to represent nature, and thus bound to a cycle of accumulating signification and, eventually in/as informational technology, the hyper-production of signs in digital media. Benjamin intimates as much, albeit in different (and pre-digital) terms, when he claims that, unlike the word of God and pure language of nature, the language of fallen man tends toward "over-naming" things.<sup>62</sup> The concept of "the over-named," or the "*überbenannt*,"<sup>63</sup> articulates precisely this tendency of language to hyper-produce signification and accumulate its mere signs. Here, in bourgeois language, words seem to lose all essence and connection to the divine.

The hyperreal in its digital manifestation is, in sum, the accumulative effects of linguistic signification, which is forced, by virtue of its thorough saturation of the world, into methods of ever-shrinking compression. The digital is not solely about the human will/ability/need to connect, but also a technological method to contain, preserve, and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>63</sup> See also Britt's discussion of the concept of the overnamed in Britt, *Benjamin and the Bible*, 36-37.

further *stimulate* the endless accumulation of communication-effects. As I will argue later, *the Internet is precisely the überbenannt*. It is a means of compression and circulation of the over-named, or the total effects of the over-production of mere signs. Its effects having reached a point of saturation, signs upon signs upon signs, language is forced to compress itself into information. The Internet is the digital language-ecology and the latest material technological firmament, if you will, of Benjamin's concept of the over-named.

### **3. Babel, Pure Language, and the Virulence of Signification**

Before theoretically elaborating this transition from language to information, it is necessary to say a bit more about the forms and functions of language in the modality of fallenness à la Benjamin. Benjamin theorizes his concept of the "overnamed" in the context of the biblical Book of Genesis. Within Genesis, perhaps most directly pertinent to our discussion of the virulence of language is the story of the Tower of Babel. In the story, language receives both an origin and a destiny. The narrative gives an account of primordial communication and community—a lost, indeterminable prehistory of a society preceding all linguistic difference. Here, the original purity of language is ontologically characterized by its direct, unitary, and immediate nature. Communicative problems relating to ambiguity, (mis)translation, and (mis)representation have not yet entered the historical scene. The story of Babel conceives of a world of perfect communication—a pure and uncontested, undifferentiated language. Echoing the story of Eden, it foretells humanity's fall from the existential condition of socio-communicative immediacy to that of mediatization and socio-linguistic alienation. With God's intervention at the tower of Babel, language loses its referential innocence, so to speak. When language becomes

untethered from the universal whole of social reality, a distance/difference creeps in not only between people and cultures, but also between words and things, representations and the represented. This becomes an allegorical precursor, perhaps, to what Henri Lefebvre referred to as the “significant *decline of referentials* at the beginning of the twentieth century.”<sup>64</sup>

As the story of Babel goes, a humankind unified by a single tongue grows untempered toward the heavens. God responds by fragmenting the human tongue into many divisions, thus introducing the dimension of *alienation* into the domain of communication. The Tower of Babel threatens to exceed the worldly containment of humanity. Man gets too close to his own ascendance, presumably an unwelcomed challenge to the sovereignty of God, whose judgment alone determines worldly immanence/transcendence: “Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them.”<sup>65</sup> Responding to the threat of a humanistic pantheism at Babel—the threat of a radical human singularity eclipsing the authorial rule of monotheistic singularity—God alienates human from human by dividing the universal tongue into many. He introduces into language the functions of mediation and representation in the broadest, most hyperextended and malicious sense: *mediatization*.<sup>66</sup> God thereby banishes the transcendent potentiality of language along

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<sup>64</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 111.

<sup>65</sup> Genesis 11: 6 in *A Hebrew-English Bible: According to the Masoretic Text and the JPS 1917 Edition*, 2005. <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0111.htm#1>.

<sup>66</sup> As Paul Virilio describes it, “mediatization” is historically a strategy of power. It is a way of conquering a sovereign, leaving him impotent but still formally occupying his position *in name only*. He writes, “Up until the twentieth century, to be MEDIATIZED meant literally being stripped of one’s IMMEDIATE RIGHTS.” Virilio cites the example of Napoléon, who “founded the industrial press in France, indirectly engendering what would become a modern communications complex.” Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 6.

with its pantheistic destiny (which, in retrospect, and by virtue of its derailment, would be less a destiny than a mere trajectory).<sup>67</sup> Henceforth, the word is untethered from the organized universal domain of the human tongue and, as Thomas Hobbes intimates, language post-Babel “in tract of time grew everywhere more copious.”<sup>68</sup> If virulence is the tendency of exponential growth by mere exposure, the narrative of Babel, which is echoed in various cultural forms throughout western civilization, is where the virulent function of language is born. Language is hereafter a matter of untempered accumulation, spiraling indefinitely outward from the profound loss of its original purity—something out of nothing, proliferation out of absence. And is the mere sign not exactly this virulent miracle? The ‘mere’ sign is perhaps anything but, at least when one considers its profound proliferating and accumulating effects.

God’s divine intervention at Babel is not only a divisive alienatory maneuver—a form of mediatization similar to Virilio’s conception—but also an injection of the form and function of *mediation* into language. To consider a solitary, pure, and unified language is to think about a language with no differentiation or challenge, and therefore also of a language with no external dispute about which linguistic systems or uses of speech and

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<sup>67</sup> There is a noteworthy irony here. This story of God’s sovereign intervention at Babel—namely, the forbiddance of transcendent linguistic mediation and pantheistic development of humanity—is likely part of a broader narrative in the Judeo-Christian west, which engenders the very ideas/ideals of humanistic pantheism and the role of language in transcendence to begin with. After all, it is only in hindsight of the development of western thought that we can even name what was purportedly forbidden at Babel. Put broadly, the narrative surrounding transcendence and the Fall, however directly or indirectly, would come to shape, delimit, and eventually haunt virtually every crevice of western epistemology and metaphysics. Following the methodological leads of Benjamin and Britt, what is perhaps more interesting than the story as such, are the ways in which the story (of Babel) serves as a kind of touchstone narrative for thinking about the dynamics and impetuses involved in the re/production, mass dissemination, cultural impacts, and generalized desire for the story.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1994), 16.

writing constitute a better or more accurate representation of reality. The Fall from a unified language is a fall from the pure utopian immediacy of the world of presentation into the uncertain depths of the world of *re-presentation*. But did the former ever truly exist outside of its ideal? Or is representation originary? The Fall at Babel is a falling into the complete uncertainty of truth and meaning, *which is a precondition for the panicked production of truth and meaning in/as signification*. Babel, or more accurately, the condition of lack and uncertainty which this reading of the story of Babel elucidates, is the first line of code in the virus of language, if you will. Hereafter, language ceases to be an undisputed, immediate presentation of reality. In the shift from immediacy to the function of representational mediation, language takes on a new secondhand role: the uncertain and contentious character of representationality, which has largely defined the terms of western epistemology (and is, no doubt, active in the scriptural text, and potentially germinating from within it).

We might imagine that God's punishment of Babel is the moment when language takes its very form *as such*. Before He fragments the unified whole at Babel, one would assume that there is no reason to even think about language; without differentials, there is no category or conception of it. It is only in imaginative retrospect, after having encountered a plurality of languages in the real world, that we may call a human tongue "pure" or "unified." That is to say, the profound moment of loss at Babel is arguably not a moment of loss at all, but the very point at which language can be thought to take its original shape. Everything afterward is just a retroactive will to purity. Prior to Babel, one might imagine that language—or whatever amorphous whole preceded it—is *synonymous with the real*. Before it becomes differentiated in/by the radical plurality of tongues, the

category of language has no shape outside that of reality. It is immediate and thus without the burden of representation, in other words. It therefore remains formless, shapeless. Language is hereby imagined as proto-language in a pre-virulent state, so to speak; that is, insofar as such a state is imaginable at all.

The central point is this: I contend that in order for something to be language, there must be some component of representation present in it. Thus, *the sign is originary*. That is to say, for something to count as language, the *impossible* burden to mediate or communicate some content—whether the content is an expression of a mental state, thought, idea, concept, or a simple description of an object—must be present. This burden is impossible because it wills an equivalence, if not an identical relationship, between the sign and object. It tries to make the latter correspond perfectly with the former, and it fails in each and every instance. At Babel, however, it is perhaps impossible to conceive of language as such (as I have conceived it, at least, but not necessarily consistent with Benjamin's conception) because there is not yet the possibility (nor the frustrated impossibility) of communication/miscommunication, translation/mistranslation, representation/misrepresentation, and interpretation/misinterpretation. These binaries do not yet exist.

Without some degree of difference, language is wholly ubiquitous, inextricable from the real. It cannot exist without difference, yet it is still willed and produced, perhaps, by the fiction of its purity. *If language did not hold within its depths some secret promise of immediacy, it would cease to speak and vanish altogether*. But this will to purity is wholly retrospective, if not retrojective: it is a projection of language's present into the ruthless unknown of its past; it is a posterior will, which manifests in scripture and theory alike. The

fate of language is to forever grasp desperately for a lost wholeness, a purity that is impossible to retrieve because it never actually existed outside of its ideal (or more accurately, outside of its sign). The struggle of language to access its pure state would be almost Sisyphean if not for the fact of its accumulative effects. If Sisyphus had gathered a new boulder for each futile trek, discarding the debris of the previous climb at the foot of the hill, it would eventually compound, like the sign, into a volume so great it encompassed both the hill and Sisyphus alike. Language beckons the myth of Sisyphus to be rewritten to reflect this new absurdity.<sup>69</sup> No matter their specific contents, the labored efforts of Sisyphus (along with Sisyphus himself and everything/everyone else) are all fated to drown in their own productivist accumulation. The only truth to the idea of 'pure' originary language, therefore, is its functional nullity as a pure (and empty) sign: to produce ever more impure/derivative language.

If language were to somehow miraculously retrieve its purity, *this would mean its total annihilation*. Language is taken here as that which is defined precisely by its abstraction from the supposed purity of a pre-verbal, primordial substratum. Herein lies the challenge made by language to God's sovereignty, and the impetus for His punishment in the form of radically pluralizing it—only God, not language, may remain ubiquitous and wholly inextricable from reality. In the Babel narrative, it is through the negation of language by God that the original instance of linguistic difference takes place. The story of Babel articulates a boundary that language cannot transgress; it introduces an 'outside' which language can name but never really know, never encapsulate completely with words or signs. What is this outside if not the distance between God and the world of human

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<sup>69</sup> See Albert Camus' absurdist interpretation in Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 1st Vintage international ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

language, between the knowing/speaking/writing subject and the infinite?<sup>70</sup> In Genesis, language is injected with difference and given its name/identity in two ways: 1) through God's pluralization of the human tongues and the consequential separation of words from reality; and 2) through His negation of language, His alterity to it.

Today, God's alterity to language implied by the story of Babel continues to haunt even the most secular of cultures. In the wake of the death of God, a vast nothing lies outside language; a void fills the exceptional exterior He once occupied. Everywhere lingers the need for some sort of exteriority/alterity of language, and everywhere, particularly in much of "scientific" linguistics, its existence and possibility are assumed in bad faith. As Nietzsche put it, "I am afraid that we shall not be rid of our belief in God because we still have faith in grammar."<sup>71</sup> Almost universally, we long for some sort of outside which could guarantee the meaning and certainty of language, the accuracy and precision with which it represents reality: a transcendental signifier.<sup>72</sup> Despite this profound absence, we still maintain some degree of what Baudrillard considers to be the primary occupation of western faith. We keep hold of a "wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning," and that an exterior something (God) could "guarantee this exchange [of signs]."<sup>73</sup> Even the most militant atheist belongs to the legacy

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<sup>70</sup> Here I am referring to the distance between the finite and the infinite, specifically in a manner similar to that of Søren Kierkegaard. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 12 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>71</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 170.

<sup>72</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. See also Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition a Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10151039>.

<sup>73</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 12. [Bracketed content is my addition].

of this inescapable, broader faith.<sup>74</sup> But the absence of alterity—or perhaps, more accurately, *absence as the alterity of language*—has not led to a nihilistic silence, a widespread disbelief, total postmodern doubt, nor to a great refusal of speech and communication. On the contrary, this nihilistic condition has led to all the more signification. The faith in language's representable Other (deistic or otherwise) becomes integrated into the broader systemic whole, operationalized as part of its virulent reproduction. As Baudrillard frames it, "what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? [...] The whole system becomes weightless, [...] exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."<sup>75</sup> This circuit of human signification guarantees, by virtue of its being closed and self-referential, a path of infinite and indefinite exchange. And because signification accumulates, it also guarantees infinite and indefinite production.

Beyond its functions as epistemological or moralistic parable, the story of Babel also expresses a great general fear of language, its power and possibility. Babel expresses, through an implicit account of language's untethering from human will, the virulent capacity and destiny (if not *manifest destiny*) of language. Curiously enough, we may suggest that the literal and cultural inscription of the story of Babel, and the contextual cultural legacy of representation of which it is a major part, have performed a similar fragmentary function to that of God's punishment. To be sure, in the act of writing Genesis

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<sup>74</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "Christianity is inseparable from the West. It is not some accident that befell it (for better or worse), nor is it transcendent to it. It is coextensive with the West qua West, that is, with a certain process of Westernization consisting in a form of self-resorption or self-surpassing." Thus, by logical extension, Christianity and atheism/secularism/humanism are inextricable from one another. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 142.

<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 12.

11, and perhaps in the act of writing in general, language is set on a course of infinite division and evolution, if only by inadvertently introducing a hegemonic concept of representation into the world. This is also at the root of why (re)translation is a perpetual requirement of writing: a translation, like an instance of representational communication, is always necessarily imperfect.<sup>76</sup> Language becomes relativized and is henceforth a matter of secondhand re-presentation, abstracted from the supposed originality and immediacy of presentation.<sup>77</sup> In this sense, the introduction of linguistic difference at Babel implies a kind of malice put into motion by God, unleashed onto the world in the form of profound uncertainty.<sup>78</sup> Regardless, the story implies that something about language—in this case, the unification of human language (and thus also, of human solidarity)—threatens the sovereign doctrinal authority of not only God, but also of the constitution of reality itself. In the story of Babel, the fate of language is to become relegated to the outside (or, at least, to the margins) of reality. It becomes that which encounters reality only by mimetically and virally replicating it in/as the virtual. A cycle of replication and accumulation is part and parcel of the sign's primary function of standing in for the real. And because this function is a means to an impossible end, it is also a demand which is forever perpetually renewed by its own inadequacy. Thus, the sign is prone to intensified accumulation. And eventually, having been transfigured into a simulacrum, it moves

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<sup>76</sup> See Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 71-72.

<sup>77</sup> This plays out in the Fall from Eden as well, whereby access to the Tree of Knowledge—and presumably a kind of immediacy in relation to the world—are removed from human capacity.

<sup>78</sup> This is perhaps related to Baudrillard's "principle of evil." That is to suggest, in other words, the contradiction between the purity of language and its representation as 'mere sign' was for Baudrillard part of a broader Manichean interplay. See Jean Baudrillard, "For a Principle of Evil" in *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Phil Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (Semiotext(e), 2008), 219-230. See also Jean Baudrillard, "The Roots of Evil" interview in *The Agony of Power*, Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 6 (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e); Distributed by MIT Press, 2010), 109-127.

beyond the function of merely standing in.<sup>79</sup> The sign itself becomes an independent modality which makes the real manifest by means of its own reproduction. Because it is disavowed from reality, the sign ultimately comes to constitute the real itself (which, according to Baudrillard, means the displacement by the hyperreal of a former real which has been annihilated or “murdered” by its own signification).<sup>80</sup> The linguistic sign is always only a copy of something which evades dominion; it is a stand-in for that which refuses to appear, escapes human intelligibility, for the nothingness or blank exterior over which language remains suspended. In Baudrillard's language, perhaps, the sign is never really a sign at all, but always already a simulacrum. In that sense, it is perhaps the sign which is born at the loss of Babel, the central linguistic figure and function of representation and the originary expression of language as such.

From this perspective, the potentiality of language to transcend the dominion of God—worldly containment and the real—is stifled at Babel not by repressive force but by the stimulation of its hyper-production. By breathing life into language, God injects the *virulent form* of language into the world. And moreover, the narrative of Babel alone does this with the proliferation of scripture. This is a kind of immunization strategy, whereby the problem of language—namely, the biblical threat that human transcendence poses to traditional hierarchies of power (or perhaps to the *nomos* of the world<sup>81</sup>)—is dealt with not simply by containing or constraining language, but by letting it virulently multiply, variate, (re)produce, and flourish. Signs proliferate and signification accumulates. Babel is not as

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<sup>79</sup> This process is detailed in greater theoretical depth in chapter two.

<sup>80</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, Trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 10-11. See also Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 10.

<sup>81</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (Telos Press Publishing, 2006).

much an allegory for the repression of language as it is an allegory of the conditions for its *compression*.

With the proliferation and accumulation of signs, Babel tells a story about the 'liberation' of language and the autonomization of the sign. From a certain theoretical perspective, the Tower of Babel is a story about language's release from the real. One might suggest that the *viral destiny of language* was put into motion at Babel, where the *microbe of difference* was first unleashed. To reiterate and expound some of the principles developed in the preceding sections, it is only through difference that language takes shape, even if that is the mere difference between arbitrary signs (Saussure). Only through the fractal scopes of plurality, contingency, and ambiguity can language take any sort of form or function. Without differentiation or some form of negation, antagonism, or opposition, language is inextricable from the real. Without difference, language is not a mediator of nature, but rather one of its immanent actors.<sup>82</sup> The pure originary language that was allegedly lost at Babel should probably not be conceptualized as language at all, but as a function of its production. The idea of a lost pure language should be taken as an attempt to name something (or perhaps a no-thing) which radically precedes (and thus resists) the nominal order entirely: the attempt to verbalize something which is inherently preverbal/nonverbal, such as God's word or the truth of nature, for example. In many ways, the idea of pure language is to linguistic theory as the state of nature is to modern political

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<sup>82</sup> This concept of difference is distinct from, but not necessarily incompatible with, Heidegger's existential category of "dif-ference," which he conceptualizes as being "not a generic concept for various kinds of differences." Rather, he writes: "It exists only as this single difference. It is unique. Of itself, it holds apart the middle in and through which world and things are at one with each other." Heidegger, "Language," 200. Contra Heidegger, I am less interested in a singular existential structure of language called difference than a principle of difference by which plurality is continually reproduced.

theory. Each is inclined to create narratives about the characteristics, capacities, and faculties which are allegedly most central to our humanity. They articulate the emergence of language and civilized society, respectively. But the two kinds of narratives are inverted, perhaps: whereas one articulates the emergence of order (governance, law, and civil society) out of disorder (the chaotic state of nature), the other seems to articulate the emergence of disorder (the virulent multiplication and copious growth of languages) out of order (pure language and the divine). The story of Babel represents a violent and profane attempt on the part of language to represent, penetrate, reduce, consume, encapsulate, and metabolize the sanctity of some pure state, to render accessible to language its own radically inaccessible alterity. Are we not still stuck today in the hyperactive turbines of this allegory? Regardless, it forces a confrontation between language and its abyss—the radical absence from which language emerges, but which it nevertheless impossibly tries to articulate. “The will to truth drives men even further into the void: that they now recognize it as void is no help. [...] the present structure of human life forces men to continue searching for that which their understanding tells them is not to be found. Such is the epistemology of nihilism.”<sup>83</sup>

#### **4. The Passage of Language into Information: The Internet as the *Überbenannt***

Once language is unleashed from its abyss onto the world, and the sign is free to virulently flourish and accumulate, the problem of language becomes one of managing and containing this overproduction of its signification. What happens once it reaches a saturation point? Has it already reached this point in/as digital culture? As I develop in this final section, the viral accumulation of language must always be met by some kind of

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<sup>83</sup> Strong, “Language and Nihilism,” 259.

*compression*. Information and digitality per se, I argue, are precisely the effects of the compression of signification into ever smaller manifestations. That is to say, informationalization, or the reduction of all communication to bits, is the latest historical moment in language's virulent proliferation; information is thus its latest type of artifact. Everything is reduced to information when language is eclipsed by its own image, stifled only by its own replication and evolution, devoured by its own functionality in the global swarm of signs. The core reality of language—supposing that we can even say there was ever one to begin with—is forever lost. Language's core can never be located, (re)actualized, realized, articulated, spoken, written, recorded, or understood. This is because it has been eclipsed by the accumulation of its own objectless image, buried underneath a swarm of language effects, devoured by linguistic signification, and, by logical extension, collapsed beneath the weight of a global digital culture utterly gorged with information. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it, "Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification."<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the 'nature' of language is chaotically swarmed by its own aporetic effects. Linguistics itself becomes a matter of the diverse classification of effects surrounding language's profound uncertainty and indeterminacy. Its uncertainty and radical particularity deliver an endless production of discourse on and of language, and thus also a ceaseless torrent of means to organize, classify, and categorize it. Language, like sexuality (which I return to in the following chapter), has in effect been denatured by the multitudinous attempts to pin down its natural order.<sup>85</sup>

Denatured, displaced, untethered and without a root in the real, language expands outward

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<sup>84</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>85</sup> See Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 69.

in (and as) 'modernity' until it saturates everything, drenches everything in signification, and is eventually forced to *virtualize itself in information*. That is to say, the emergence of the digital is concomitant with the virtualization of hyper-accumulative signification.

At the Tower of Babel, language ceases to transcendently or transfiguratively mediate the real, and henceforth takes on the centrality of a technological or *instrumental* function which will eventually become the digital—the most recent constellation of an interminable and indeterminable path of mediatization, which has no unified purpose or direction other than the efficiency of its self-propagation. From the virulence of the pre-digital sign to the virulence of the online social network (whereby the production and circulation of signification are hyper-intensified), self-propagation becomes the most dominant ethos of digital culture (insofar as ethos is the correct term). Just as Horkheimer traced the unfortunate trajectory and legacy of human reason to its instrumental form—namely, the proliferation of means he referred to as the “eclipse of reason”—so too does language, in its most instrumental capacity (i.e., in the modality of representation), and through a proliferation of its effects, eventually constitute an eclipse: the eclipse of/by information. Horkheimer laments that “language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production in modern society.” He continues, “Every sentence that is not equivalent to an operation in that apparatus appears to the layman just as meaningless as it is held to be by contemporary semanticists who imply that the purely symbolic and operational, that is, the purely senseless sentence, makes sense.”<sup>86</sup> In all its historical forms, reason is, after all, by no means immune to the virulence of language. In fact, what historical form of reason exists independent of language? None. The

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<sup>86</sup> See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 22.

proliferation of one tends toward the proliferation of the other; their functions are inextricable from one another. It would make sense to suggest that information and, by logical extension, informationalization, are the latest techno-historical effects of hyper-rational, hyper-instrumental language. Put differently, information emerges at a point in which the production of signification has become so perfectly and operationally efficient that, in effect, it transgresses its own delimitations/confinements and pushes beyond itself into that which is unknown and unspoken by language, into the alterity of language itself.

The supposed "freedom" of language is unleashed in the digital and informational via this quasi-transgression: the freedom of language to discover, describe, express, create, communicate messages, extend and direct contents, establish social solidarities, and to organize political resistances, are all to some extent ruses for the stimulation of production. Thus, in information, language has not actually transgressed anything at all. It cannot constitute an actual penetration of limits because *it is a transgression only in sign*. For as soon as language has transgressed its barriers to access a non-linguistic exteriority/alterity, the latter ceases to be language's Other; subsumed/consumed by the sign, the 'outside' becomes the inside. Human language colonizes the unnamed by ceaselessly naming and renaming it. The draw/desire/impetus/imperative to access (through linguistic and representational signification) that which is not already within the domain of language is like a desperate drive to solve an unsolvable riddle. It is completely unyielding and unforgiving: "our language will not let us rest."<sup>87</sup> And does this absurd condition of language's impossible demand on us not perfectly describe the individual

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<sup>87</sup> Strong, "Language and Nihilism," 249.

subject's occupation with (and relation to) information in digital culture?<sup>88</sup> Mark Poster describes the condition of the linguistic subject in the "mode of information" as follows:

Electronic mediation [...] subverts the autonomous, rational subject for whom language is a direct translation of reality, instantiating instead an infinite play of mirror reflections, an abyss of indeterminate exchanges between subject and object in which the real and the fictional, the outside and the inside, the true and the false oscillate in an ambiguous shimmer of codes, languages, communications. In this world, the subject has no anchor, no fixed place, no point of perspective, no discreet center, no clear boundary. [...] In electronically mediated communications, subjects now float, suspended between points of objectivity, being constituted and reconstituted in different configurations in relation to the discursive arrangement of the occasion.<sup>89</sup>

This perpetual digital (re)constitution/(re)mediation of subjects by language formations in discourse is a symptom of over-production. Signs have swarmed all referentiality, rendering impossible all human footing. Moreover, this is symptomatic of the operationalization of an ambiguous multi-directional will through which information is constantly (re)produced, assembled (in variation), and recycled/(re)circulated. A general drive to bring everything into the domain of intelligibility and language, to make sense of the radical plurality of the universe of information, reproduces the aporia of over-production time and time again. By seeking to translate the real into words, by trying to swallow all possible Otherness in its production, representational language is programmed to fail every time. And moreover, it is predestined to accumulate the multitudinous effects of its failures, ad nauseam. At a certain point of accumulation, information logically becomes the central characteristic mode of language's compressive production of signs and their accumulation.

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<sup>88</sup> One is reminded here of Franz Kafka in many regards, but perhaps most notable is the fate of the protagonist K. in *The Trial*. K. is accused of an unidentified crime, and the novel develops over the course of his trying to navigate the dense manifold of law (and of language, I might add) in order to understand the accusations against him. Absurdly, of course, he never finds clarity. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir, Definitive ed. (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995).

<sup>89</sup> Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 1990), 11.

Thus the transcendence of language by means of its rational use is impossible,<sup>90</sup> as is the corporeal transgression of its limits by the sign in speech and writing. As Jacques Rancière intimates in his discussion of Holocaust representation, these limits are not necessarily due to a deficit or insufficiency of language. It is not that there are no words available for conveying atrocity/the inhuman, but just the reverse: "Where testimony has to express the experience of the inhuman, it naturally finds an already constituted language of becoming-inhuman, of an identity between human sentiments and non-human movements."<sup>91</sup> The task of representing genocide, for example, "confronts no impossibility of representation; nor is there a language peculiar to it."<sup>92</sup> As far as language goes, our subject-object grammar automatically structures and preconfigures, in effect, the representational spectrum of possibility with which a human encounter with radical alterity can be rendered intelligible. Thus, the difficulty or impossibility of representation here is not so much an epistemological problem, but rather it involves an *ethical* concern: the incapacity of language to represent is an incapacity to 'do justice' to the specific instance/encounter/recollection of the inhuman, or the incapacity to capture the contours of its existential peculiarity with an always already constituted form of language.

Although it is not Rancière's specific thesis, one may infer from the above passages that he is articulating an aesthetic situation of over-signification and the excessive cultural production of meaning. The cliché trope of grief experience, whereby one finds

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<sup>90</sup> This is not to write off, however, the possibility of non-linguistic/non-representational transgressions of language altogether. It is simply to claim that if these transgressions are possible, they are not possible via representational language and reason.

<sup>91</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," in *The Future of the Image* (London; New York: Verso, 2009), 126. See also Alexander R. Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," in *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 78–100.

<sup>92</sup> Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," 126.

oneself 'at a loss of words' does not, in terms of the most extreme historical atrocities/abjections, articulate a loss at all. It articulates a saturation of representation. A contributing factor of the impossibility of language to self-transgress its own limits, to reach its own exteriority/alteriority, is its plethora. Yet the universalizing will to breach these limits of language, to name the unnamed and unnameable, seems to be a driving force of the re/production in/of digital culture. It forms a vast virtual/virtualizing machinery of abstract and multifarious production: namely, the global/globalizing meta-network of accumulation which we colloquially refer to today as the Internet. What describes this global hyper-connective festival of digital signification better than the *Überbenannt*?

Every bit as decentralized and heterogeneous, the Internet is probably as (if not more) difficult to define than the slippery objects of visuality, language, and sexuality. Because it is forever transforming, accumulating, and endlessly *developing*, the Internet's substance and essence are unlocalizable and irreducible. Furthermore, it is riddled with contradiction: the Internet is hardware and software; it is real but also virtual; it is at once hyper-connective and hyper-alienating; it enables incredible mobility but at the same time collapses distance in real-time communication, enabling and encouraging stationary life-worlds; it is material (data centers) but also immaterial (cloud computing). The Internet is, perhaps, but a vast complex of contradictions, the emergence of which is an inevitability of the virulent multiplication of signs and signification.

It is widely and commonsensically recognized that the historical roots of the Internet, digital information technology, and the explosion of networked computation are found in the rapid techno-scientific developments of the twentieth century. Many consider the work of Alan Turing (1912-1954) historically, for example, as the beginning of digitality

as such.<sup>93</sup> By logical (and, presumably, by historical and empirical) extension, digital roots run as deep as developments in the science, technology, and engineering of electricity that were witnessed throughout the nineteenth century. Historical figures ranging from Thomas Edison to Alexander Graham Bell and Nikola Tesla are often touted as agents of precursory technological 'progress'; their contributions to the science and engineering of electricity are thought to anticipate the general emergence of digital technology. Such narratives, while grounding the Internet's emergence in historically specific technical/epistemological capabilities and subject-agents, risk obscuring deeper genealogical insights into the Internet, particularly in terms of language and culture. By conceptualizing the Internet as the *Überbenannt*, I merely intend to highlight the potential emergence of these insights. To be clear, however, I do not intend to undertake such a genealogical study, as this would constitute an entire project in itself. Rather, I want to point out the possibilities for alternative perspectives on the Internet and digital media in general, specifically in regards to its perennial rootedness in human language. A technical history of the Internet would likely be tasked with backwardly tracing concrete and specific instances in the evolution of these technologies and their concomitant scientific epistemologies which eventually enabled the possibility of the digital network society. The analytical approach to the Internet as the *Überbenannt* which I propose, however, historicizes the Internet without claiming to arrive at any sort of positive objective historical knowledge of it. Referring to the Internet as the *Überbenannt* is thus a way of structurally identifying and conceptualizing a set of its most central characteristics, which happen to be rooted in language, and which constitute, as I have argued, the very destiny

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<sup>93</sup> For example, see George Dyson, *Turing's Cathedral: The Origins of the Digital Universe*, First Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

of language as virulent propagation and hyper-efficient production and reproduction. The characteristic effects and processes of the *Überbenannt* are as follows: over-naming, over-signification, over-production; hyper-representationality, hyper-referentiality, hyper-communication, hyper-consumption; the virulent and seemingly untethered circulation of *mere signs*, their generalized and limitless accumulation (alongside material accumulation), and the eventual imperative of their compression into information.

The role of language in the story of Babel is telling of this destiny to compress, toward the digital. Babel (at least, as I have read it) elucidates a central function of language (and also, of representation writ large)—namely, its virulent function and thus also its general tendencies to self-propagate, proliferate, accumulate, and pluralize exponentially with increasing operational efficiency. The constant accumulation of signification continually reproduces the conditions of, and necessity for, its perpetual compression. Language—or more specifically, clusters of trans-referential linguistic signs and their produced meanings—spreads as if by contagion. This is exponentially exacerbated by the development and social/cultural dissemination of communicative technologies throughout history, from the first utterance of speech as the primordial grunt to the smartphone. Each iteration of communication technology, each new generation of media devices, affords new and increasingly efficient strategies for the production and circulation of signs, as well as methods for the compression of signification. The telephone compresses verbal signs into analog electronic *signals*; the modern computer compresses analog signals into digital information, coded and reconstituted in/as visual re-presentations. Compression techniques that are increasingly hyper-efficient manage informatic/informetric excesses of accumulated signs, but also encourage and provoke

their exponential (re)production in/as the digital. Put differently, in terms of the production of linguistic communication, information technologies serve a twofold functionality: 1) to usher and foster increased info-production and exchange; and 2) to contain and compress the sheer volume of communication (more precisely, the volume of its byproducts—signification).

This twofold functionality of informational compression occurs with especially aggressive momentum in the contemporary global technological context, wherein networks of linguistic (and visual) communication have become almost completely virtualized online. Whereas networks of human communication once seemed to have certain delimitations and identities, that is to say, individual contours which were forged by their differences, exclusivities/inclusivities, spatio-temporal limits, etc., today they rapidly overlap with one another without limitation, artificially (re)producing difference in mere signs. Communication used to suppose and require a distance between two or more communicating entities, but this is no longer the case. The virtualization of communication collapses all distance and corporeal difference into a single global amorphous Meta-network, the *Überbenannt*; yet it also (re)produces *signs of difference and distance as artifice*, its users none the wiser. This general process compresses all interstitial space between communicating entities, and by extension, the digital spaces between social networks. Each network becomes increasingly intertwined with every other network. Since its deployment in 2010, the Facebook “Like” button, for example, has proliferated to hundreds of thousands of otherwise unrelated external sites.<sup>94</sup> Virtually all popular media

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<sup>94</sup> Regarding the historical impact of the Facebook Like button on digital culture and the “Like Economy,” see Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond, “The like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web,” *New Media & Society* 15, no. 8 (December 1, 2013): 1348–1365.

online, from news to pornography, are accompanied by a series of links to share their contents on networks like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Hence, the productivist ideology is summarized by the imperative that everything and everyone must become statically and perpetually connected to the extent that there can be no activity online which does not effect/affect/stimulate or produce some sort of activity elsewhere. All things, all people must have a functional place in the systemic whole. Everything becomes a matter of management and containment. It is increasingly difficult for any sort of activity online to be solitary, much less anonymous. Much like the production of language operates on a (null) ideal of purity, the digital network operates on the basis of an ideal of pure and total connectivity; its end goal is to establish a perfect efficiency of instrumental and cybernetic operations, which is really to say, in other words, it has no definite end goal. A constant torrent of operations, of technological means without ends, inevitably results in virulent self-propagation.

This is by no means some hidden ideology lurking in the shadows of power. Unlike previous forms of power, its survival no longer depends on remaining unseen; on the contrary, virulence requires constant exposure and transparency. Productivist ideology is thus clearly and unabashedly promulgated throughout the language of its corporate interests, from public relations campaigns to patent applications. Take for instance the language reflected in Facebook's 2008 software patent application for its "News Feed" component:

Any type of user activity can be tracked or monitored [...] The information, people, groups, stories, and so forth, with which the user interacts, may be represented by one or more objects, according to exemplary embodiments. The monitoring module may **determine an affinity of the user for subjects, other users, relationships, events, organizations, and the like according to users' activities.** [...]

The social network provider **may determine a relationship for the user.** For example, if [a] user establishes communications with another user interested in flying private aircraft, the

social network provider may assign the relationship of the fellow pilot. [...] The social network provider may utilize a common interest in flying as a variable to measure the user affinity, for flying and/or the fellow pilot **without inquiring whether user wants to add the other user to their user's profile.**<sup>95</sup>

According to the above, Facebook's algorithms admittedly translate user activity on the network into content production. These algorithms, more importantly, automatically and semi-autonomously establish relationships and associations between user-subjects by tracking activity, compiling it in databases, and running those data against one another for potential compatibilities. All activity is rendered signification of one sort or another, produced as information to be documented, stored in databases, and used by network systems to forge a variety of types of connections, most often unbeknownst to users and without their consent: to name a few, a network system will typically establish connections between users' interests/hobbies and relevant network content/activity; between users' activities and the external media contents of other sites and networks; between users' identities, images, and advertising content;<sup>96</sup> and finally, between users' relationships with other users. These connections are what constitute (and reproduce) the contemporary digital social network as a cybernetic network—its very livelihood is the algorithmic governance of signified social relations.

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<sup>95</sup> Mark Zuckerberg et al., "System and Method for Dynamically Providing a News Feed about a User of a Social Network," February 14, 2008, [http://worldwide.espacenet.com/publicationDetails/biblio?CC=US&NR=7669123&KC=&FT=E&locale=en\\_EP](http://worldwide.espacenet.com/publicationDetails/biblio?CC=US&NR=7669123&KC=&FT=E&locale=en_EP), 2-3. [Emphases added; bracketed content is my addition]

<sup>96</sup> Facebook, for example, has gone as far as giving advertisers rights to utilize personal images of the network's users (that is, unless a user opts out) without consent or compensation. Various users have reported the bizarre experience of stumbling onto his/her photo imbedded in a corporate ad. In one particularly comical instance, a user's headshot photo was used in an advertisement for a "55-gallon drum" of personal lubricant for sale on Amazon. See Nick Bergus, "How I Became Amazon's Pitchman for a 55-Gallon Drum of Personal Lubricant on Facebook," Blog, *Nick Bergus: Thoughts on What Media Do, and Can Do Better, and Other Things*, (February 23, 2012), <http://nbergus.com/2012/02/how-i-became-amazons-pitchman-for-a-55-gallon-drum-of-personal-lubricant-on-facebook/>.

A network like Facebook (and the corporation that runs it) is like an artificial organism, if you will—an electronic Leviathan. It comes to constitute and propagate itself by establishing synaptic connections on a massive circuitry of almost one-and-a-half billion user-nodes.<sup>97</sup> The network-organism constantly monitors all signification of human-user activity and stores it in databases. Increasingly, through advanced deployment of algorithmic models, the network-organism is able to manipulate and stimulate synaptic firings, that is to say, various types of user activity; it does so almost autonomously, as though it is in possession of its own directive central nervous system.<sup>98</sup> As Wiener's etymology of cybernetics intimates early on, the network-organism becomes its own 'steersman'.<sup>99</sup> The network thus constantly reproduces, through an array of mostly undisclosed operations, a series of interchanges and exchanges of signification so vast that no single human mind could hold it all at once. On the level of the sign and the image, the organism-network is in a constant cycle of production, reproduction, consumption, and circulation of signs and signification. It accumulates to no end, propagating itself like a kind of corporate virus.

But as massive as Facebook may be, these functions extend well beyond a single network. All digital social networks (no matter how diverse), as well as the consuming-communicating-producing users of those networks, have become one and the same,

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<sup>97</sup> At the time of writing, the most recent global statistic for active Facebook users is 1.49 Billion, or roughly one-fifth of the world population. See "Number of Monthly Active Facebook Users Worldwide as of 2nd Quarter 2015" (Statista: The Statistics Portal, Second quarter of 2015), <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>.

<sup>98</sup> This idea of connective electronic media forming a global "central nervous system" is loosely derived from Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>99</sup> Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 11.

functionally equivalent to one another, collapsed into a single massive global circuitry of perpetual and inescapable signification. It is in the context of this massive cybernetic circuitry—the *Überbenannt*—that humans have begun to blur with their own machinery, disappearing into information and the substratum of their own representations. We become functional nodes in relation to our technologies, each other, and ourselves. “Suffering from the sickness of words and without trust in any feeling of our own which has not yet been rubber-stamped with words,” as Nietzsche puts it, the human figure dissolves into the digital in an ecstatic orgy of signification.<sup>100</sup> In the digital economy of the overnamed, under the domain of the *Überbenannt* and the seductive control of its algorithms, humans are reduced to “an unalive and yet uncannily active factory of concepts and words.”<sup>101</sup>

If chapter three began to examine the dimension of visibility in this post-human cybernetic productivist circuitry, and the current chapter examined its linguistic functions in/as virulence, the following chapter takes on the domain of human sexuality as a means of its reproduction. Sex, I argue, has been devoured by its own referential language, at once disappearing into, and proliferating out of, its hyper-signification. Sex has been sacrificed by language to the absent God of Information in the *Überbenannt*. It is only through a kind of informational compression that the hyper-signification of sexuality—its reproduction in the realm of language (discourse) and visibility (pornography)—that sex makes any sense in digital culture, which is also, I argue, *pornographic culture*. Moreover, through the conceptual lens of virulence, I argue that the imperative for sexuality's deployment, as well

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<sup>100</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1980), 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

as for its constant exposure vis-à-vis the drive for total transparency running rampant throughout the digital, become most apparent.

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## Chapter Five

### Digital Economies of Exposure: The Virulent Proliferation of Sexual Signification

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As an event that never reaches its completed form, as a form that does not allow itself to be entirely seized as it occurs, nudity is, literally, infinite: it never stops occurring. Inasmuch as its nature is essentially defective, [...] nudity can never satiate the gaze to which it is offered. The gaze avidly continues to search for nudity, even when the smallest piece of clothing has been removed, even when all the parts that were hidden have been exhibited in a barefaced manner.

-Giorgio Agamben<sup>1</sup>

Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. [...] The level of transparency the world has now won't support having two identities for a person. [...] To get people to this point where there's more openness—that's a big challenge. But I think we'll do it. I just think it will take time. The concept that the world will be better if you share more is something that's pretty foreign to a lot of people and it runs into all these privacy concerns.

-Mark Zuckerberg<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. "The Fappinging"

In August 2014, hundreds of intimate photos and videos of (mostly female) celebrities leaked on the online social network 4chan.<sup>3</sup> Soon thereafter, news of the collection was virally distributed across countless social networks and entertainment media outlets. A targeted leak of this scale was unprecedented; prior leaks of celebrity sex tapes had been comparatively more localized and limited, but this instance involved the

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Zuckerberg quoted from an interview in David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2011), 199-200.

<sup>3</sup> Terrence McCoy, "4chan: The 'shock Post' Site That Hosted the Private Jennifer Lawrence Photos," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/02/the-shadowy-world-of-4chan-the-shock-post-site-that-hosted-the-private-jennifer-lawrence-photos/>.

exposure of over a hundred high profile individuals. Media reports of the event circulated rumors of *an underground economy of images*: an entire preexisting community structure enabling the exchange of high-profile private media, an “underground celeb n00d-trading ring” where these photos, and reportedly more like them, were in private circulation for months leading up to the leak.<sup>4</sup>

Once leaked, the files went viral, exponentially duplicated from system to system in a matter of minutes. The leak also soon became an all-out media spectacle, receiving a flood of coverage from entertainment, information technology, security news outlets and interests, and any other content producer willing to exploit the controversy, old and new media alike. In the days immediately following the leak, especially, there seemed to be an endless production of editorial moralizing about techno-privacy, rape culture in the digital age, and relentless speculation about the invasive and illegal technical maneuvers utilized and vulnerabilities exploited to procure the celebrities' data. This was a total swarm of panicked media response. By the time the leaked content reached the popular social network Reddit, however, the event had received quite the celebratory name. “The Fappening,” they called it, a portmanteau that combines the Internet slang word “fap” (an onomatopoeia meaning to masturbate) and the Happening (which presumably articulates some kind of unexpected bizarre and awe-inspiring event).<sup>5</sup> This neologism quickly gained momentum around the Web as its Subreddit (“/r/thefappening”) became a central hub for the semi-anonymous sharing of links to sites hosting the leaked content, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> David McCormack et al., “New Wave of Leaks Target More Celebrities as Authorities Prove Unable to Stop Spread as It Emerges Naked Photos May Have Been Passed around Online Club for MONTHS,” *Mail Online*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2740387/New-wave-leaks-plague-celebrities-authorities-prove-unable-stop-spread-suggest-naked-photos-passed-users-online-CLUB-months.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “/r/TheFappening,” Social Network, *Reddit*, (2014), <https://www.reddit.com/r/TheFappening>.

conversations within an electronic community of digital voyeurs (a place for happy fappers to fap together).

The Fappening constituted a violent collective eruption of porn culture, an ecstatic explosion of chatter alongside a libidinal swarm of sexed images. This was not an isolated event, however. It belongs to a broader virulent propagation of sexual signification, which takes place, I argue, across a bio-technological neural network that was prefigured and preconditioned in advance by the cult of celebrity consumption.

Putting aside the more obvious normative ethical judgments conjured by the leak and directed toward the hacker(s)<sup>6</sup> and the amorphous troves of semi-anonymous viewers who received and retransmitted its content, what is perhaps most interesting about this event—or what might be thought of as a non-event or spectacular parody which occupies the place of (and demonstrates our desire for) the historical Event—is the phallogentric, libidinally charged pornographic festival of digital exchange on networks like Reddit immediately following the leak.<sup>7</sup> What conditioned such an eruption? What pressures or tensions preexisted it? What might this occurrence suggest about the virulent tendencies of digital culture and the visual economies it seems to enable and engender?

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<sup>6</sup> Actor Jennifer Lawrence, a victim of the leak, went as far as to claim that the leak constituted a "sex crime." See "Cover Exclusive: Jennifer Lawrence Calls Photo Hacking a 'Sex Crime,'" *Vanity Fair*, November 2014, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/10/jennifer-lawrence-cover>.

<sup>7</sup> By bracketing considerations regarding issues of privacy, the ethics of sharing, and misogyny in digital culture, I do not mean to devalue them. Rather, I only mean to suggest for the purposes of this analysis that even those judgments (which clearly proliferated in response to the leak) constitute part of the virulent swarm and pornographic explosion which I am interpreting. Moreover, I wish to point out that the sexualized economy of the celebrity-image seems to emerge as a mainstream ethical concern only once it no longer involves profits, seemingly having become untethered from the *direct* control of industry.

The festival, as Georges Bataille understood it, is a “contagious movement of purely glorious consumption.”<sup>8</sup> By definition, a festival opposes the human normality of everyday life. It involves *the concentrated discharge* of a social organization of exceptional elements, that is to say, a preconfigured explosion of some highly compressed surplus of accumulated energy otherwise disallowed, systemically discouraged, deemed undesirable, or queered by the status quo. The festival has a violent component, but one which is regulated by exchange, and which belongs to the “countervailing prudence” of human civilization.<sup>9</sup> It dares, then, to constitute a violent break or rupture in the real or, at least, an interruption of reality itself. The festival, in particular, relegates and contains some pre-human sexual violence or pre-rational animalistic vengeance of nature’s remnants in the human; it sets “bounds to disorderly urges” that can never be extinguished entirely by the fact of civilization or society as such.<sup>10</sup> An orgiastic festival, for example, provides entry into a kind of prefigured realm of relief from the ‘civilized’ world of sexual limits and taboo, work and reason. It mediates between this realm and that of animalistic pre-civilization as a kind of supposedly neutral non-space through which one can be represented to the other and vice versa.<sup>11</sup> By means of organized collective control-by-stimulation, it presumably functions to contain and provide an outlet for sexual desires and behaviors that have fallen on the forbidden side of whatever historically specific limits and taboos have been drawn.

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<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, “Sacrifice, the Festival and the Principles of the Sacred World” in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell Readers (Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 214-215.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 1st City Lights ed (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 66.

<sup>11</sup> “For this representation to succeed, the space of mediation must remain neutral.” François Debrix, “Introduction: Rituals of Mediation,” in *Rituals of Mediation: International Politics and Social Meaning*, ed. François Debrix and Cynthia Weber (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxix.

The Fappening, I believe, constitutes precisely this kind of violent festival event, only digitized. The celebrity figures who were exposed were rendered digitally transparent by something akin to what François Debrix calls a “ritual of representation.”<sup>12</sup> The carnality of these figures was captured in pixels, by the image, but ultimately betrayed by the digital reproducibility and contagion of their sexual representations. Not sacrificial objects of excess, but *images* of excess, they were cast into virulent promiscuous circulation by a series of rituals of sexualized exchange and obsessive sharing. The mania surrounding the leak suggests a deep faith in the image and its ability to represent the object, but this is somewhat misleading. The ecstatic virality by which the images were distributed had little to do with their objects, I think. These nude representations spread by means of a sex-crazed contagion or virality, which inflicted a mass orgiastic male gaze not on the *object* of desire, but on *the image*. I would wager that the pleasure of sharing the images came primarily from the excitement of their ‘authenticity’ as images—the overwhelming orgy of visual authenticity whereby seeing is believing (and everybody wants to believe). From this perspective, the collective ecstasy of the Fappening was not so much an expression of the cultural objectification of gender. Instead, it was an explosion of representation emanating from the object’s absent center, a virulent proliferation of images which are hyper-reproduced in the aftermath of the object’s disappearance, and mass-distributed by a global digital circuitry. In other words, the Fappening was not only a pornographic festival but also a profound site of “panic-stricken production of the real and the referential.”<sup>13</sup> It was a massive representational celebration of having perceptual access to authentic

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., xxviii.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 13.

privacy, to the hidden referent or 'real thing'. Thus, the libidinal mass expulsion/explosion was exorcised by the mode of representationality: a pleasure mass reproduced by means of the sexed image. As Baudrillard suggests: "*Images have become our true sex object, the object of our desire.*"<sup>14</sup>

In a sense, the media mania surrounding the leak confirms once again that digital/informational representation is culturally received as a captured and reconstituted fragment of the *authentic* and the *real*. That is, the degree of realism and authenticity perceived in media content is a deciding factor in the rate and scale of its dissemination, a precondition for virality, even. If this was not the case, the content of the leak would be attributed no more weight of importance or share-value than, say, a series of fake nude celebrity images doctored in Photoshop. It is a simple point, but one which helps form a hypothesis lurking over the entirety of this dissertation: the degree to which a representational digital artifact is received as authentic or real (which, again, may have little to do with its actually existing object/objectivity)—in short, what we may call its *corporeal sign value*<sup>15</sup>—plays an important role in its tendency to go viral. The higher this value, the more likely its virality.<sup>16</sup>

Questions concerning the authenticity of leaked content (such as those thrown into discursive circulation by various celebrities who initially publicly denied the authenticity of

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (NY: Semiotext(e), 1988), 35.

<sup>15</sup> For elaboration of the concept of "sign value," see Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, (Telos Press Publishing, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Empirical studies which have examined the question of what makes an image viral have tended to overlook this general principle of representation and its philosophical implications. See, for example, Arturo Deza and Devi Parikh, "Understanding Image Virality" (IEEE, 2015), 1818–1826. See also Marco Guerini, Jacopo Staiano, and Davide Albanese, "Exploring Image Virality in Google Plus" (IEEE, 2013), 671–678.

the images) only fueled the mediatic fire of the event by contributing to the superabundance of chatter surrounding it. The doubt about pornographic authenticity and the frenzy to verify/deny it is likely because the leak revealed something previously hidden from public representation, and was thus without the comparative verifiability which other nude images could likely provide. In lieu of such proof of authenticity, many users on /r/thefapping frantically searched non-pornographic images of the exposed celebrities, noting birthmarks, tattoos, and other bodily markings for identification. However minor this particular doubt may be, it helps reveal the vague role that a demand for some sense of reality and authenticity plays in virulence. Moreover, some degree of doubt about authenticity may contribute to a more general mediatic aporia, "an assortment of vague and contradictory diagnoses," which function to obscure the central truth about any given matter.<sup>17</sup> Put differently, it is the *ceaseless and insatiable desire for the real and the authentic which sets the terms of virulence and the conditions for its (re)production*. The apparent concerns of doubt and demand for authenticity of the image is the hollow center around which representation orbits and accumulates without cessation.<sup>18</sup>

There is a clear linkage between virulence and the need for 'authentic' representation, but perhaps there also exists a link between *authenticity* and *pornographic desire*. According to Christian Hansen et al., pornography generally involves "a

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<sup>17</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>18</sup> There are countless examples of media contributions to some sense of aporia about the event. The most comically telling of the digital divide between mainstream media and digital culture, however, is one instance of a CNN "Technology Analyst" confusing the 4Chan social network for the handle of the hacker responsible for the leak, which sprung a reactionary meme: "And who is 4chan.org? Some sort of hacker?" See Tina Nguyen, "CNN Tech Analyst Thinks 4Chan Is A Person: 'He May Have Been A Systems Administrator,'" *Mediaite*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.mediaite.com/online/cnn-tech-analyst-thinks-4chan-is-a-person-he-may-have-been-a-systems-administrator/>.

documentary impulse, a guarantee that we [its consumer-viewers] will behold 'the thing itself', caught in the indexical grain of cinematographic sound and image."<sup>19</sup> A pornographic film or image gives access to the supposed real of some instance of carnal knowledge. It is by providing this access that even the most fantastical pornography is a work of realism (or, perhaps, of hyperrealism). "What a porn film really is," Richard Dyer writes, "is a record of people actually having sex; it is only ever the narrative circumstances of porn, the apparent pretext for the sex, that is fictional."<sup>20</sup> For all their comically bad acting, forced and superfluous narratives, and fantastical/fictitious settings and premises, pornographic movies (and pornographic media in general) always suggest some degree of access to the exposed "real thing."<sup>21</sup> The representation of nudity in the image acts as simulation of the transgression of some limit: the acquiring of forbidden access to a sexual real. Thus, the authenticity of the celebrity photos was all the more dire a concern for the Fappening. The photos, and pornographic media in general, required some sense of reality in the signification of pleasure. Because its livelihood as a media product requires the arousal of its consumers, a porn must convey some sense of access to reality, some sort of realism or immersion (no matter how farfetched its fantasy may seem).

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<sup>19</sup> Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham, and Bill Nichols, "Pornography, Ethnography, and the Discourses of Power," in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, by Bill Nichols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 211. [Bracketed content is my addition].

<sup>20</sup> Richard Dyer, "Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography," in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 109.

<sup>21</sup> Julie Levin Russo, "'The Real Thing': Reframing Queer Pornography for Virtual Spaces," in *C'lickme: A Netporn Studies Reader*, ed. Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, and Matteo Pasquinelli (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007), 239–52, [http://www.networkcultures.org/\\_uploads/24.pdf](http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/24.pdf).

None of this is to claim, however, that some measure of the representational real or authentic is the sole determinate condition for virulence. As I argue in the following pages, we would do well to be reminded that the digital and the virulent are not without their own respective material and corporeal limits. It nearly goes without saying that the celebrity images vulnerable to viral proliferation in the 2014 hack/leak could not have been disseminated nearly as widely or quickly if not for a vast global technical meta-network of electronic communications, fiber optics, data centers, a profusion of (mobile) computing technologies, and, of course, active and interested subject-users. Furthermore, there were several preexisting cultural conditions leading up to the leak and its explosion. The content of the leak was subject to viral proliferation not because of the intentions of a few hackers, nor because of the moral failings of digital culture (although, to be sure, those are there). Rather, the leak's virulence—and by logical extension, the festival it seemed to inaugurate (the Fappening)—could not have occurred as explosively (or perhaps implosively) if not for the industrially constructed sexual desires of a populace of media consumers, hyper-activated by the images of already over-sexed celebrities preconditioned for consumption and found suddenly hyper-exposed (more nude than nude),<sup>22</sup> virulently unclothed by a global male gaze. There is no doubt that the provocation and reproduction of (sexual) arousal has long been a marketing strategy practiced on digital culture for the ends of increased efficiency of content dissemination.<sup>23</sup> These constructed sexual desires were intensified and unleashed, and stimulated not directly by the amorphous power of their

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<sup>22</sup> See Baudrillard's formulation of the hyper-real (more real than the real) in Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 99. See also his phrasing of "the more-visible-than-visible" in Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> See Jonah Berger, "Arousal Increases Social Transmission of Information," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 7 (July 1, 2011): 891–893.

corporate master architects, but through a kind of exposure to pornographic representation of the collective familiar we call celebrity. This electronic festival involved the collective exposure to celeb-sexuality which seemed for many to be the first time the distribution of such sexual signification had taken place untouched by industry. No Photoshop, CGI, no Hollywood magic, and no marketing strategy: it was as authentic as it gets, supposedly. It thus became a hyper-sexed "frenzy of the visible,"<sup>24</sup> to borrow Linda Williams' term: a dizzied festival of exposure and orgy of the real, which takes place in a world at once starved for *and* suffocated by reality. A festival of faps, or what must have felt for some like the day the world came together. The Fappening reveals the pornographic functions of viral media, assuming the form of virtual orgy: the semi-synchronous hyper-sharing/hyper-consumption/hyper-reproduction of pornography on a global scale.

## **2. From the Porn Industry to Porn Culture**

Based on a brief and limited survey of user conversations occurring within /r/thefappening in real-time as the leak continued its virulent spread,<sup>25</sup> I would speculate that, for many individuals who engaged in the Fappening's ecstatic exchange of non-consensual pornographic imagery, the leak unwittingly constituted a kind of reversal or false empowerment in relation to the entertainment industry. From the perspective of many users, the circulation of celebrity-sex imagery briefly ceased to be something

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<sup>24</sup> See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> It is unfortunate (for this analysis, at least) that these conversations were deleted rather than archived, subject to Reddit's banning /r/TheFappening soon after the leak. See Pamela Engel, "Reddit Just Banned the Subreddit Where People Were Posting The Celebrity Nude Images," *Business Insider*, September 6, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-fappening-has-been-banned-from-reddit-2014-9?IR=T>.

directly motivated and distributed by the interests and perceived intentions of an industry, but rather motivated by a quasi or perceived *demos* of consumers, sharers and fappers in a Web 2.0 cyber-cultural exchange. The entertainment-culture industry has, after all, systematically fed sexualized images of female celebrities to these individuals for decades, strategically stimulating sexual response, and instrumentally appropriating/relegating/regulating this response toward various activities and interests. As Horkheimer and Adorno observed about a then still nascent Hollywood, "The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise [...] actually comprises the entire show."<sup>26</sup> This principle is hyper-active/hyper-activated in/by the mass produced pop culture of the contemporary western/westernized world, whereby images of over-sexed and over-gendered celebrity are constantly and ruthlessly reproduced by the promise of their object: a degenerating object of desire which, consequently, seems to disappear into the accumulating images of its representational promise. The virulent orgy of celebrity porn that took place in the Fappening should not be strictly regarded as the moral failings of a mass of individuals, but rather as a reactionary/revengeful eruption of a consumer-collective that has been conditioned by sexualized media virulently reacting to industry having momentarily lost fuller control of its production and distribution.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 111.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, when a big-budget, widely marketed and culturally decadent film such as *Transformers* (2009) gets funded and produced by a studio, it is no surprise to see the film cast with hyper-sexualized celebrity media figures such as Megan Fox. This is most likely done, at least in part, in order to strategically provoke and promote a libidinal response. In the example of *Transformers*—a reboot of the animated children's series that debuted in the mid-1980's—the timing of the film's release corresponded with the sexual maturation of the franchise's original (predominantly male)

This is not to say, however, that the film industry ever had full control of its media objects. Nor do I claim that the Fapping is an event constituting a democratizing rupture in industrial control of the content it produces. It was by no means revolutionary. As with any sharing and reproduction of content outside of the narrow sanctions of a company's distribution (whether it is physical media, digital downloads, or streaming licensing), the result is typically an increase in viewership/fans, and what the language of marketing might refer to as 'organic growth', which is ultimately in the monetary interests of industry.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, contemporary entertainment industries contend with a balance between control and contingency, direction and adaptation, cultivation and appropriation, a balance inherent to digital media dissemination. It is as if Niccolo Machiavelli's *virtù* and *fortuna* have been corporatized, no longer the prerogative of the subject-Prince, but rather of the complicated instrumental occupation of a vast networked bureaucracy of the leisure industry.<sup>29</sup> What makes the mediascape on which Hollywood and the rest of the media industry operate *viral*? It is, in part, a degree of contingency and vulnerability vis-à-vis contagious unorchestrated trends, mediatic exchanges, and collective cultural formations

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demographic. In this example and others, I do not think it would be a stretch to speculate that myriad components of a film or franchise are implemented strategically to direct or engineer libidinal response toward some sort of consumption or activity. See Michael Bay, *Transformers*, (DreamWorks Pictures (US); Paramount Pictures (International), 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Most notably, this point was developed in the recent study on the industry effects of digital media sharing/piracy: See Bart Cammaerts, Robin Mansell, and Bingchun Meng, "Media Policy Brief 9: Copyright & Creation: A Case for Promoting Inclusive Online Sharing" (The London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications; Creative Commons license, Non-commercial, September 2013), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/172985274/LSE-MPP-Policy-Brief-9-Copyright-and-Creation>. See also Adrian Johns, "Piracy as a Business Force," *Culture Machine* 10 (2009): 44–63.

<sup>29</sup> See *The Prince* in Niccolo Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1994).

and directions of energies. The media effects of marketing strategies cannot be perfectly controlled by industry, especially in today's media environment.<sup>30</sup> In mediatically complex scenarios, the (sexually) stimulatory effects of an industry's propagated images can culminate in various formations of digital cultures or communities of exchange such as the Fappening, which extend well beyond the *particular* interests of any given marketing program or intent.

The sum total stimulatory effects of repeated and ceaseless exposure to sexualized images (not to mention heteronormative gender performances<sup>31</sup>), from a seemingly endless variety of input and output sources and across multiple media interfaces, composes a vast indeterminable network of productive machinery, or what might be called a *perfect swarm* of sexual representational media, which in effect relegates preconditioned and socially prefigured libidinal energies<sup>32</sup> toward no particular end, but relegates them nevertheless. All of this constitutes, I argue, a virulent media culture in which sexualized

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<sup>30</sup> This degree of contingency in media distribution has no doubt been an important and formative topic in contemporary media/communication strategies, advertising, marketing, etc. The central question for the entertainment industry is how to harness virality, how to induce/manipulate it strategically. The insidiousness of viral marketing, of course, is in the fundamental artifice involved in forced or controlled virality: the necessity of its apparent desire to *appear* organic and contingent. For an overview of the general marketing interest in viral media, see Robert Payne, "VIRALITY 2.0: Networked Promiscuity and the Sharing Subject," *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 4 (July 2013): 540–560. For an example of recent marketing research on virality, see also Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral?," *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, no. 2 (April 2012): 192–205.

<sup>31</sup> See Susanna Paasonen, "Repetition and Hyperbole: The Gendered Choreographies of Heteroporn," in *Everyday Pornography*, ed. Karen Boyle, 1st ed (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 63–76.

<sup>32</sup> By using the term "libidinal energies," I do not intend to refer to some instinctual force or drive in the Freudian sense, nor to some a priori substance or inherent sexual meaning (as I elaborate in the final section of this chapter). Nor do I refer to the self-same object and desire of the totalizing framework of "desiring machines" developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Rather, the term refers to libidinal activity, broadly defined, as manipulated yet semi-autonomous constructions, particularly as formations of complex interplay between media, industry, and consumerist everyday life. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 26–27. See also Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

and gendered subjects are always already subjected to a ceaseless and indeterminate series of reproductive and remediating processes—an electronic orgy of hyper-sexual signification and its accumulation in informational, representational media. Twentieth-century industry intensified the production of sex for a consumerist western world, and today we witness its rampant effects as a virulent production of sex's signification in digital culture.

Perhaps the rest of the entertainment industry needs to come to terms with what the porn industry has arguably understood for some time now: the reign over sex's signification has long been over.<sup>33</sup> Since the advent of a commonly purported 'user-driven' web of digital media, the porn industry has been radically transfigured, decentralized, and dislocated.<sup>34</sup> High-production pornography has largely given way to the amateur type.<sup>35</sup> As Namita Malhotra points out, "Amateur pornography is often made up of moments of unsexy footage, of disruptions that should derail pleasure, but instead are functioning to emphasize the sensations around porn."<sup>36</sup> This emphasis, I would argue, is principally a productive function of the 'authentic'. Amateur porn includes "unsexy footage" because these images tend to function as a sign that indicates some degree of authenticity, which

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault very well understood that the discursive reign over sexual signification was fragmented by various loci of power, but to my knowledge he does not articulate the notion that it has ceased to be governed. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> The question of where to locate the porn industry has become quite complicated. See Matthew Zook, "Report on the Location of the Internet Adult Industry," in *C'lickme: A Netporn Studies Reader*, ed. Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, and Matteo Pasquinelli (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007), 103–24, [http://www.networkcultures.org/\\_uploads/24.pdf](http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/24.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> For a broad discussion of the semi-displacement by "DIY [do it yourself] Web Culture" and some of its political implications, see Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics*, Critical Media Studies (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Namita A. Malhotra, "Amateur Video Pornography," in *Porn: Law, Video, Technology*, Histories of the Internet in India (The Centre for Internet & Society, 2011), 121.

stimulates and reproduces sexual response. There is a kind of intensification of pleasure associated with this remarkable sense of authenticity, which partially explains why porn is likely to venture outside of the explicitly 'sexy' into other domains such as disgust.<sup>37</sup> Lower video quality, absence of cinematography, and general lack of professionalism in a porn video are characteristics which tend to potentiate its realism. As Simon Hardy puts it, there is a pleasure which can be "deduced from the circumstances surrounding amateur performance, where it is known that the motive of the performers is sexual rather than financial."<sup>38</sup> Helen Hester further notes that even professional hardcore porn tries to emulate the aesthetics of amateur porn in order to "communicate a desire that apparently exceeds the professionalization of pleasure associated with the porn industry."<sup>39</sup> Amateur porn portrays a kind of 'reality' to sex which industry high-budget porn traditionally does not. As Hester claims: "Authenticity—the focus on attempting to verify that a representation depicts an actual extra-textual event—is evidently a significant concern within contemporary photorealistic forms of still and moving-image pornography."<sup>40</sup> Porn is "evidently interested in generating an authenticity effect."<sup>41</sup> It uses several

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<sup>37</sup> Tanya Krzywinska theorizes that a function of disgust in pornography involves the partial interruption of "the protective shield of the representation." In a sense, disgust mediates representation in such a way as to prevent porn from becoming banal description. Likewise, the sexual representation of bodies in images mediates disgust such that sexual arousal can be maintained. The effect, Krzywinska seems to think, is the provocation of an overall intensification of energies which goes well beyond genital arousal. Tanya Krzywinska, "The Dynamics of Squirting: Female Ejaculation and Lactation in Hardcore Film," in *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics*, ed. Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (Guildford: FAB Press, 2000), 33.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Hardy, "The New Pornographies: Representation or Reality?" in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. Feona Attwood (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 9.

<sup>39</sup> Helen Hester, "Pornography and the Appetite for Authenticity," in *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 135.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. Among Hester's examples are the films of infamous Italian porn director, producer, and actor Rocco Siffredi. She recounts one sex scene from the pornographer's 2009 film *Rocco Ravishes LA* in which Siffredi ecstatically exclaims to the film's female performer Bobbi Starr: "You're so real."

'authenticating devices' to achieve an increased sense of realism and immersion. It tries to "create a kind of reality effect by using intertextuality and visual language to create a sense of authenticity."<sup>42</sup>

Several porn studies scholars have theorized this role of the demand for authenticity/realism in (amateur) porn, and have pointed out various mechanisms and devices by which its signification is achieved. According to Pasi Falk, the penis functions in porn as a kind of "'indexical sign' in [the] Peircean sense [...] wherein there is a spatio-temporal or physical connection between the sign vehicle and the entity signified."<sup>43</sup> It functions, in other words, as an authenticator of the real—the penis acts as a kind of referent (primarily for a male audience, at least). By extension, the ritualization of the 'money shot' would serve also as a visual authenticator.<sup>44</sup> The excretion is a reminder not only of real sexual pleasure, but also of the biological facticity of the actors, their reality and corporeality. It represents a loss of control, in some sense, or an overwhelming by sexual signification and pleasure; and, as Zabet Patterson puts it: "it is the loss of control

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So real." Hester continues: "He [Siffredi] later refers to her as 'Beautiful one, so pretty and so real'." Throughout this scene, she notes, the director/actor also refers to a reminiscent encounter with another actress from years earlier in his film *Sandy Insatiable*, "recalling a scene that has already been **coded as authentic** [...]" Ibid., 136. [Emphasis added].

See also Rocco Siffredi, *Rocco Ravishes LA* (Evil Angel, 2009), <http://www.hotmovies.com/video/159213/Rocco-Ravishes-L.A./>.

<sup>42</sup> Hester, *Beyond Explicit*, 136. Regarding the "fetishization of the real" and the authentic as a reflection of the popularization of so-called 'reality TV shows' as well as new digital amateur and 'gonzo' forms of porn production, see Feona Attwood, "Conclusion: Toward the Study of Online Porn Cultures and Practices," in *Porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography*, ed. Feona Attwood (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 239-240.

<sup>43</sup> Pasi Falk, "The Representation of Presence: Outlining the Anti-Aesthetics of Pornography," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 10, no. 1 (1993), 19.

<sup>44</sup> A similar point is made and expanded in Murat Aydemir, "Significant Discharge: The Cum Shot and Narrativity," in *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning*, by Murat Aydemir (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 93-112.

that guarantees the realness of the sex."<sup>45</sup> Tim Stüttgen seems to extend this idea of the role of the money shot when he argues that the visual representation of other bodily fluids in porn can play a similar role. He writes: "Through more body fluids like spit and tears, an attempt is made to somehow double the effect of the cum shot: any fluid seems to generate more visual authenticity, more verifications of the 'real act'."<sup>46</sup>

Signification of the authentic real everywhere haunts the pornographic, and perhaps, drives its very reproduction. Likewise, because achieving some sense or signification of the real in pornography is one of its most crucial elements, the pornographic also overwhelms the real by trying to represent/replicate/reproduce it. The interstitiality between 'real sex' and its representation (traditional pornography) has been all but exterminated. After this collapse between the supposed sexual real and its representationality, all sex becomes virtualized. Desires cultivated and sustained online bleed into 'real sex'. They cannot be wholly abstracted from a 'pure' organic state of corporeal sexuality, the substance/referential meaning of which is always already null.

These virtualizing processes describe the "pornographication" or "pornification" of media and culture. At the outset, this notion of pornification helps to theorize a basic situation whereby the globalized world's most dominant cultural, technological, economic, and geopolitical operations almost fetishistically demand authenticity and the real on a level comparable to pornography. As the pornographic increasingly travels the same virtual/material networks and operates within shared digital media interfaces alongside all

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<sup>45</sup> Zabet Patterson, "Going On-Line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 116.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Stüttgen, "Before Orgasm: Fifteen Fragments on a Cartography of Post/Pornographic Politics," in *Post/porn/politics: Symposium/reader: Queer-Feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex-Work as Culture Production*, ed. Tim Stüttgen (Berlin: B-Books, 2009), 12.

other technocultural operations, they becoming one and the same obscenity: the sum effects and symptoms of a technologically radicalized demand for exposure.

One can see some of the more acute (and bizarre) symptoms of generalized pornification and virtualization in the case of Japan's "epidemic" of youth asexuality<sup>47</sup>, as well as the country's cultural-pathological phenomenon of *Hikikomori*: the widespread self-withdrawal/reclusion of individuals who isolate themselves from social life, refusing to leave their homes for periods ranging from six months to multiple decades.<sup>48</sup> Japanese sexual culture—the stuff of fetish clubs, sex robots, and tentacle Hentai porn (forgive the generalization)—is somehow simultaneously an influential, global beacon of liberal and loose sexual attitudes, yet also a site of striking socio-sexual withdrawal. Everywhere reflects the obscene, the hypersexual, and the pornographic in the everyday, yet also the asexual. Both the figure of the self-identified asexual and the subject of *Hikikomori* exhibit symptoms of virtualized sexuality because their sexual-social subsistence is based entirely on informational/digital activity.<sup>49</sup> Similar indications are reflected in the

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<sup>47</sup> The normality/commonality of asexuality is staggering: one recent survey found as many as forty-five percent of female youths and just over twenty-five percent of male youths in Japan reported that they "were not interested in or despised sexual contact." See Abigail Haworth, "Why Have Young People in Japan Stopped Having Sex?," *The Guardian*, October 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/20/young-people-japan-stopped-having-sex>.

<sup>48</sup> See Alan Teo, "The Intersection of Culture and Solitude: The Hikikomori Phenomenon in Japan," in *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*, ed. Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014). See also Michael Hoffman, "Nonprofits in Japan Help 'shut-ins' Get out into the Open," *The Japan Times*, October 9, 2011, sec. News, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2011/10/09/national/media-national/nonprofits-in-japan-help-shut-ins-get-out-into-the-open/#.Vt4h35wrKUK>.

<sup>49</sup> One obvious objection to this line of reasoning would be that asexuality involves a lack of libidinal desire/interaction/fantasy, and therefore is not an instance of virtualized sexuality, strictly speaking, but rather it is altogether absent. However, this does not account for the practices of all self-identified asexuals: the findings of one survey study found that around fifty percent of asexual subjects reported masturbation. In this sense, the term 'auto-sexual' may be slightly more precise than the term asexual. See Morag A. Yule, Lori A. Brotto, and Boris B. Gorzalka, "Sexual Fantasy and Masturbation among Asexual Individuals," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 23, no. 2 (August 2014), 92.

widespread popularity of “dating-simulation” video games throughout what is sometimes referred to as “virtual Japan.”<sup>50</sup> Are the hyper-sexual aspects of Japanese culture perhaps explicated as a complex series of panicked responses to the crisis of sexual disappearance? A virtual/virtualizing overproduction/overcompensation in response to an asexual ‘epidemic’? Or is the growth of asexuality symptomatic of some kind of desensitization from an over-signified, over-stimulated hyper-sexual culture: the result, perhaps, of a society that is “oversexed and underfucked.”<sup>51</sup> At any rate, in the case of the paradox of Japanese sex and culture, I hypothesize that the exchange operations of an economy of (sexual) exposure, which can take place solely in the virtual, have generally begun to push out, or partially displace, the old libidinal economy that takes place in the visceral/corporeal. *Hikikomori* emerges because the libidinal economy has been entirely pornified. It is increasingly easier for one to become reclusive and confine oneself, insofar as one has access to the Internet and the virtual infinitude of representational possibility which a global human-technological meta-network affords. In other words, because the digital functionally collects, compresses, and modulates (as information) the intensified proliferation/eclipse of hypersexual exposure, it has become, for some, a sufficient means-to-sexual regulation and fulfillment (or, in many cases, it a virtual haven for asociality/asexuality).

Most instances of technocultural virtualization are quite limited in scope because they remain tethered to traditional interfaces of computational information technology. However, accelerated developments in virtual reality technology (which at the time of

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<sup>50</sup> Emily Taylor, “Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture,” *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 29 (2007), 192.

<sup>51</sup> Iris Osswald-Rinner, *Oversexed and Underfucked: über Die Gesellschaftliche Konstruktion Der Lust* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011).

writing are set to hit consumer markets by the first financial quarter of 2016)<sup>52</sup> mark the beginning of a potentially radically new hyperrealist sexualism: a new (erotic) medium of virtualization in/as digital culture. In fact, pornography is already being produced and marketed in a medium of full visual-immersion via VR devices such as the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift.<sup>53</sup> Soon, insofar as the VR bubble does not pop, the possibilities for explicitly sexual immersion in virtual environments could very well stretch far beyond the domain of visual simulation to establish simulatory circuitries for the communication of tactile sensations. In fact, tech startups have already begun development of technologies which make this possible.<sup>54</sup> A Dutch company named "Kiiroo," for example, developed a product line of what they have termed "teledildonics," which the company defines as "sexual products capable of communicating across distances over the Internet."<sup>55</sup> Marketed mostly as a remedy for the woes of a long distance relationship, these devices are essentially inter-communicative sex toys that wirelessly transmit mutually participatory tactile feedback between interactive users in order to digitally replicate/reproduce stimulatory tactile sexual sensations. Teledildonic technologies seek to produce in the

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<sup>52</sup> See Grant Brunner, "Oculus Rift vs. HTC Vive vs. PlayStation VR: Battle of the High-End Headsets," *ExtremeTech*, March 14, 2016, <http://www.extremetech.com/gaming/222394-should-you-buy-an-oculus-rift-htc-vive-or-playstation-vr>.

<sup>53</sup> See Lance Ulanoff, "Naughty America Is Betting Big on VR Porn at SXSW," *Mashable*, March 14, 2016, sec. Tech, <http://mashable.com/2016/03/13/business-vr-porn/#kb7oySlXxqq4>. For a more detailed technical discussion, see also Jeff Grubb, "Strap on Your Oculus Rift and Get Ready: Interactive Porn Is Coming," *VentureBeat*, May 2014, <http://venturebeat.com/2014/05/21/strap-on-your-oculus-rift-and-get-ready-interactive-porn-is-coming/>.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see Mariella Moon, "Exoskeleton for Your Hand Lets You Feel Virtual Objects and Control Robots," *Engadget*, October 26, 2014, <http://www.engadget.com/2014/10/26/dexmo-virtual-reality-exoskeleton/>. See also "Robot Hand Communicates Grip Force, Body Temperature and Touch," *DigInfo TV*, March 27, 2012, sec. Research, <http://www.diginfo.tv/v/12-0045-r-en.php>.

<sup>55</sup> Presumably this term indicates a play on the word dildo: tele-*dildonics*. See "Kiiroo's Digital Sex Index," *Kiiroo*, 2015, <https://www.kiiroo.com/digital-sex-index/>.

virtual a sense of sexual immersion, following an ever-increasing demand for 'authenticity' in virtualized sexual human response vis-à-vis the integration of immediate (yet hyper-mediated) sensory experience into already advanced techniques of digitally reproduced visual realism. If this type of tactile simulatory-stimulatory technology proves to be more than a novelty and gains some degree of mainstream popularity, pairing it with already advanced visual-simulation VR technology would foster an unprecedented lure of (hyper)realism and experiential sense-immersion, which the digital has always dreamt of in science fiction, but has never materially actualized. Indeed, the functions of biology and technology are increasingly blurring, or at least, overlapping.

The loss of interstitiality between the real of sex and its representation (or even its simulation) has been accelerated by a proliferation of amateur-produced, low-budget Internet pornography. This reflects the broader orgiastic celebration of the supposed real. Or, perhaps more accurately stated, it reflects a celebration of the representation of a lost, absent, and/or radically uncertain real. Yet the collapse between 'real sex' and porn does not result in their becoming identical to one another. Rather, the two categories have become separate but hyper-relational nodes on the same functional circuitry, and thus more immediate to one another in/as a mutually-reproductive relation. Put differently, in digital culture, the distinctive modes of so-called real sex and of representational (pornographic) sex effectively form a concursive bond. The solidification of this bond between the corporeal-sexual and the visually-centric economy of its pornographic representation, along with porn's shift from the predominant domain of industrial production to that of amateurist production in what has been called the contemporary

"share economy,"<sup>56</sup> entails a stabilized mutual reproduction of sign and signification. Because the two tend to rely on one another to such great extent, the experiential/phenomenal real of sex and its (predominantly visual and auditory) representation become increasingly inextricable from one another. Herein, the porn industry has, in some sense, given way to a broader *porn culture*. Conversely, one may also suggest that culture has been *entirely subsumed by industry*. This is a hypothesis which is very much in line, of course, with the basic thesis on the culture industry developed by Horkheimer and Adorno.<sup>57</sup> Industry floods all human life because it continually produces and reproduces culture (whether that is media culture, porn culture, or digital culture) by means of ceaseless marketing and representation. However, one cannot be entirely certain either way, as the logical outcome of either developmental direction—namely, from industry to culture or vice versa—is the complete loss of distinction between the two domains.

Of course, the production of porn is no longer strictly controlled by a central conglomerate of producers, directors, set designers, and paid actors (although these forms still exist), but by a kind of sexual quasi-demos of web users, or fappers. The porn industry once held much more of an informational levy on the (moving and still) sexual image. The unofficial capitol of porn, San Fernando Valley—also known colloquially as 'porn valley', 'San Pornando Valley', and 'Silicone Valley'—has suffered a significant decline in production. In August 2014 it was reported that porn production permits declined around

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<sup>56</sup> See Juho Hamari, Mimmi Sjöklint, and Antti Ukkonen, "The Sharing Economy: Why People Participate in Collaborative Consumption," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 2015, 1–13. See also Susan Fournier, Giana M. Eckhardt, and Fleura Bardhi, "Learning to Play in the New 'Share Economy,'" *Harvard Business Review*, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

ninety-percent in just two years.<sup>58</sup> It is not entirely clear, however, to what extent the more traditional twentieth century porn industry of the San Fernando Valley has suffered financial harm due to the emergence of electronic social networks, digital ideologies of freedom/transparency/expression, and the development and mass distribution of affordable 'prosumer'<sup>59</sup> technologies which provide a wider quotidian populace with new abilities for film production, media development, and other content creation. It is fairly clear that the traditional moguls of pornography do not possess nearly the dominion over markets and culture they once did.<sup>60</sup> We might imagine figures of porn such as Larry Flynt and Hugh Hefner<sup>61</sup> with an increasing anachronicity, analogous to the infamous figure of the news media gatekeeper whose function was to narrow, and thus shape, the content and character of mediatic geopolitical reality.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Verrier, "Porn Production Plummets in Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Times*, August 2014, sec. Entertainment, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-onlocation-la-porn-industry-20140806-story.html>.

<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of media phenomena surrounding the term "prosumer," see Giovanni Cesareo, "From the 'Work of Consumption' to the 'Work of Prosumers': New Scenarios, Problems, and Risks," in *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa, Global Handbooks in Media and Communication Research (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 403–413.

<sup>60</sup> See Catherine Elsworth, "US Porn Industry Seeks Multi-Billion Dollar Bailout," *The Telegraph*, January 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/4165049/US-porn-industry-seeks-multi-billion-dollar-bailout.html>.

<sup>61</sup> For an anecdotal example, consider the recent realty listing of the in/famous Playboy Mansion asking for \$200 million and the conditional agreement that Hefner is allowed to live out his remaining years in the mansion after the sale takes place. Hadley Malcolm, "Playboy Mansion on Sale for \$200 Million, but Hef Stays," *USA Today*, January 11, 2016, sec. Money, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2016/01/11/playboy-mansion-on-sale-for-200-million/78621932/>.

<sup>62</sup> These figures certainly still exist, as do our corporate masters and various modalities of capitalist exploitation and domination. But the mediascape through which they exert power and control is challenged by more fractal, localized, and complex systems, and not to mention the general decline and digital transmutation of the traditional print industry. The global financial system, of course, is each minute a bit more stacked in their favor and the world-wide income gap widens by the second; but this is not only due to the exploitative intentionality of individuals in power, but rather, also due to the virulent and exponential technological momentum a global system almost entirely abstracted from human life.

With hegemonic control over the production of pornography, the porn industry supposedly guaranteed (in a specific and limited sense) the 'opposite' of 'real sex', or its differential. In other words, the porn industry traditionally operated according to some semblance of an 'ethos' of exception/exceptionality in relation to the actual and the real. Industry pornography did not have the realist aspirations which it has today—it cultivated, projected, and reproduced images of being above, or superior to real sexuality. Here, porn production took place as an artificial modality beyond the domain of 'natural' sex, beyond the margins of the real, and in adherence with a general/standard professionalized aesthetics of the unreal, typified by phantasmal exaggerations of sexuality. To borrow a term from McLuhan, the industry perhaps provided a kind of mediatic "massage"<sup>63</sup> or relief mechanism from reality by means of visually (and auditorily) manifested/represented fantasy. Thus, industry-produced porn was in the business of manufactured *ideals*: the ideal bodies, the ideal scenarios, the ideal forms/positions/acts of copulation. For example, the late twentieth century produced an image of the heteronormative female porn star, characterized in part by her blonde<sup>64</sup> hair, 'ditzzy' or infantilized ignorance, surgically augmented sexual appearance, and gender performativity.<sup>65</sup> This vague familiar image of a (which is probably symptomatic of a broader aesthetic of industry pornography)

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<sup>63</sup> See Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> For a related discussion (not directly relating to porn) regarding the mediatic construction of the blonde female figure online, see Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, "Virtually Blonde: Blonde Jokes in the Global Age and Postfeminist Discourse," in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, ed. Karen Ross (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 88–104.

<sup>65</sup> Regarding the notion of gender performativity and the role of language, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997). See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006). For an excellent critique of Judith Butler's understanding of the transgressive potentiality of gender performativity vis-à-vis Baudrillard's work, see Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 60-65; 122-127; 137-140.

undoubtedly helped to reproduce and (re)mediate multiple forms of sexual ideations and typifications beyond porn in the real, everyday practices, preferences, and understandings of unrecorded private 'real' sex.<sup>66</sup>

In the late twentieth century, the industrial (re)production of pornography was not only involved in the manufacture of phantasmal sexual ideals, but also in the reproduction of difference. The difference/distance between 'real sex' and porn, however, was hyper-activated and hyper-intensified by industrial technologies of reproduction and distribution. At an indeterminable point of intensified production, the 'actual' substantive difference—that difference between real sex and the pornographic, which was once thought to be rooted in the empirical—is no longer efficiently reproduced. The images or signs of difference—a reproduction of mere signs, of differential signs—overwhelm the possibility of any actual difference. As Lefebvre theorized: "Differences are replaced by differential signs, so that produced differences are supplanted in advance by differences which are induced—and reduced to signs."<sup>67</sup>

To say that porn, as an agent of 'artificiality', corrupts some organic or 'natural' form of sexuality, is to ignore these complex reproductive processes. Such claims also mistakenly presuppose that an identifiable/intelligible/localizable ontological, a priori meaning, or authentic structure belonged to sexuality in the first place. What 'nature' of sex is there to possibly be distorted? Discourses that typify many second-wave feminist rhetorics, which criticize pornography on the basis that it distorts sexuality and

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<sup>66</sup> For a general discussion relating to the murky waters of the effects of pornographic exposure on sexual norms and practices, see Susanna Paasonen, "Between Meaning and Mattering: On Affect and Porn Studies," *Porn Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 136–142.

<sup>67</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 389.

instills/reproduces "unnatural" power/gender relations and unrealistic understandings/practices/expectations, now seem mostly anachronistic,<sup>68</sup> or worse yet, they have been adopted and appropriated by the policies and politics of neoconservative/neoliberal states.<sup>69</sup> This is not to say, however, that there is no value in feminist porn-critique, at least insofar as it avoids naturalizing sex, or positing that it has a distortable, a priori ontology. Rather, its greatest strength and value is perhaps found in its political/ethical/normative dimensions, namely, in terms of the critique of porn's reproduction of sexual domination, hierarchical gender norms, and power relations.<sup>70</sup> Yet even here, one cannot be certain that the concursive relationship between the (re)production of 'real' sex and of pornographic sexual signification is a perfectly mirrored one. It is perhaps quite erratic, unpredictable, virulent and indiscriminate in its unintentional consequences/offshoots/outcomes. In other words, that actually occurring sexual activity and its depictions reproduce one another does *not* necessarily suggest that one field simply emulates the other. Rather, as I theorize this relationship, their mutual

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the chapter on pornography in Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 195-214. See also Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigee Books, 1981). Also, for a (culturally specific) overview of the 'tired binaries' historically dominating the pro-porn/anti-porn debate, see Susanna Paasonen, "Healthy Sex and Pop Porn: Pornography, Feminism and the Finnish Context," *Sexualities* 12, no. 5 (2009): 586–604. Lastly, for a more general overview (or series of overviews) of the pornography debate vis-à-vis the infamous 'culture wars', see Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh, eds., *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

<sup>69</sup> In addition to bans on pornography in states like India, there have also been recent regulatory censorship initiatives in the west, and most infamously, in the U.K. See Christopher Hooton, "A Long List of Sex Acts Just Got Banned in UK Porn: Regulations Branded 'Simply a Set of Moral Judgements,'" *Independent*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/a-long-list-of-sex-acts-just-got-banned-in-uk-porn-9897174.html>.

<sup>70</sup> For an example, see Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Francis Biddle's Sister: Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech," in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 163–197.

reproduction is a reproduction of *form*—a medium, in McLuhan's sense<sup>71</sup>—not of *content*. There is no overwhelming evidence to support the notion that pornographic depictions of rape, for example, empirically reproduce instances of actual rape.<sup>72</sup> In fact, some scholars have suggested that there is strong evidence of a tendency toward the opposite effect: higher rates of consumption of violent pornographic imagery tend to correlate with lower rates of sexual violence, and likewise, in socio-legal contexts where pornographic depictions of rape are uncommon or prohibited, violent sexual crimes appear to be much more rampant.<sup>73</sup> This correlation may serve to validate the general psychoanalytic hypothesis that violent representational media are not mechanisms of reproducing actual violence, but rather outlets for the sublimation of violent instincts, desires, or tendencies.<sup>74</sup>

Regardless of how porn and sex functionally reproduce one another in terms of their respective contents, criticism of pornography through appeal to sex's reality not only falls short logically, but also plays into the very reproductive referential system by which sex (and porn) have proliferated throughout modernity. The fact that human sexuality has no such underlying reality to distort is the central principle of its (re)production, proliferation, and profusion throughout western (digital) culture. That is to say, the radical

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<sup>71</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 7-21.

<sup>72</sup> Although, the question of whether pornographic rape depiction reproduces certain gender norms/practices/formations of 'rape culture' is an entirely more complicated question.

<sup>73</sup> See Milton Diamond, "Pornography, Public Acceptance and Sex Related Crime: A Review," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 32 (2009): 304–314. Additionally, for an analogous study on the effect of violent films in relation to the decrease of violent non-sexual crime rates, see Gordon Dahl and Stefano DellaVigna, "Does Movie Violence Increase Violent Crime?" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2008), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w13718.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> Slavoj Žižek, for example, articulates this in the following: "Our fundamental delusion today is not to believe in what is only a fiction and take fictions too seriously. It's on the contrary, not to take fictions seriously enough. [...] We need the excuse of a fiction to stage what we truly are." Sophie Fiennes and Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Documentary (P Guide Ltd., 2006).

epistemological uncertainty that surrounds human sexuality is likely the most important factor determining its constant signification. If sex had an agreeable and intelligible nature, what would remain of the problem of its representation? The need/desire/impetus to expose the 'truth' of sex would likely vanish. Put differently, it is the lack/absence/impossibility of sexuality's nature or truth which ultimately engenders its constant depiction, or the constant festival of its signification. Thus, a feminist critique of porn is probably at its best when it avoids arguments and analyses that rely on implicit/explicit assumptions about the distortive 'artificial' or 'unrealistic' sexual forms which are supposedly propagated by pornographic media. A claim about what constitutes an artificial form will always be laden with an implicit claim about what constitutes a natural form. Alternatively, feminist critical theory is, perhaps, most politically and polemically poignant and interesting when it engages various dimensions of the discursive excesses of sexual signification re/produced by pornographic media, as well as the overproduction of gender meanings, norms, and inordinate power relations.<sup>75</sup>

The supposed unrealism of porn—the unreal fantasy of the sexual image and its semi-unified authority under the blanket of the culture industry—once helped to mediate (and mitigate) the amorphous shape of sexuality, but today this seems to have become the task of culture. New media have largely shattered any semblance of regulatory distance. The so-called false and the true of sex collude as signs of the same obscene hyperreal production. The spectacular (and therefore transgressable) images of pornographic sex typified by industrially reproduced professional pornography have been replaced by a

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<sup>75</sup> An excellent example of this is Helen Malson's poststructurally and psychoanalytically informed feminist analysis/critique of the case of anorexia: Helen Malson, "Anorexic Bodies and the Discursive Production of Feminine Excess," in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness, and Reproduction*, ed. Jane M. Ussher (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 223–245.

much more ominous form of digital algorithmic regulation, which guarantees more and more perfect efficiency in (re)production and circulation of signification.

With the proliferation of amateur porn online—a seemingly ‘bottom-up’ production and distribution model for sexual media—comes a functionally reproductive *proximity* in the age of digital contagion. Sex and pornography are so close to one another that one mutually haunts the other. They possess (yet, also, continually exorcise) one another, provoke and stimulate one another, and represent and reproduce one another. The real floods its image and vice versa. Porn floods sex and sex floods porn, one surging and overloading the other’s registry with demands of the authentic and the real. One domain confounds the ontological status of the other, splitting their differential function indefinitely, multidirectionally, and hyperactively. Like any other medium, porn has the alibi of being a representational conduit for that which really exists. It (re)produces desire no longer simply through its ideal projections, but also through the ecstasy of its representationality, that is to say, through representations of supposed sexual reality and authenticity. The popularized 2003 meme “Rule 34” is quite telling in this regard. It states: “If it exists, there is porn of it. No Exceptions.”<sup>76</sup> Porn—and more broadly, the general digital culture of corporeal exposure and corporeal culture of digital exposure—has become a transitory form for *relaying* the real. As a parody, perhaps, of an absent transcendental signifier, against the nullity of sex, pornographic obscenity becomes the ultimate omnipresent mediator in the production of sexual meaning/signification. The only substance of sexuality to be found is in its own digital archives: the multiplicity of its documentation in bits, spread across the mystified materiality of data centers. Its only

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<sup>76</sup> “Rule 34,” *Know Your Meme*, 2009, 34, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rule-34>.

reality is in the aftermath of its implosion: a hyper-accelerated overaccumulation of sexual signification in the form of information. The obscenity of a pornographic film pales in comparison to the obscenity of this overaccumulation. As Baudrillard articulates: "It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but [...] the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication."<sup>77</sup> Because the essence of human sexuality is effectively null, and because its form is never solidified, it is always found to be *in*-formation.

### 3. The Proliferation of Porn

Sex seems to accumulate its own signs to such an extent, as Feona Attwood articulates, that we find it "permeating every aspect of our existence and providing a language for talking about all kinds of things." She continues: "its meaning becomes more elusive and more ambiguous; politicians and their dossiers can be 'sexed up', and the term 'sexy' may simply indicate something that is noteworthy."<sup>78</sup> Sex becomes a kind of floating sign, or in Baudrillard's words, a sign "without a subject of enunciation,"<sup>79</sup> which no longer corresponds to a particular real and thus is applicable to all sorts of uses of representational language. As Hester points out, "That which is signified by the word 'porn'," and by the word 'sex' as well, I would add, "has [...] undergone something of a slippage."<sup>80</sup> The orgiastic signification of sex which permeates contemporary digital culture pushes sex beyond the limits of its own category, extending the language of sex to

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<sup>77</sup> See Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Feona Attwood, ed., *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), xv.

<sup>79</sup> Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication*, 60.

<sup>80</sup> Helen Hester, "Conclusion: Pornographication and the Explosion of the Pornographic," in *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 181.

even the unsexiest of domains. There has occurred an “extension of porn’s conceptual identity,”<sup>81</sup> and, with it, an extension of sex’s conceptual identity. As Foucault documents, the once held sacrosanct, unspoken, unrepresented/unrepresentable domain of sexuality (in the Judeo-Christian western world, anyway) has given way to its normalization and deployment across several domains.<sup>82</sup> However, today, it seems that sex is less a matter of strategic deployment on the part of power (or, perhaps even an abreaction of/to power) than a matter of all-out proliferation. Porn has helped to ‘explode sex’, so to speak, as its own autonomous category beyond the confines of any singular explanative or therapeutic, theological, historical, psychoanalytic, or biological referential system. In the debris left behind from this explosion is a kind of free-floating sexual realism, whose referents vary widely, but which nevertheless demands referentiality (and authenticity) at all costs.

Signs of sex online breach the confines of explicitly sexual pornographic websites and proliferate well beyond any digital space that is pre-circumscribed for sexual depiction. The infamous torture images from Abu Ghraib become a matter of “war porn,” for example.<sup>83</sup> U.S. ‘reality television’ shows such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*,<sup>84</sup> *Teen Mom*,<sup>85</sup> and various other entertainment media which exploit the underprivileged can now be critically referred to as “poverty porn.”<sup>86</sup> Even more directly, capitalist ideology no longer has to hide with shows like *The Briefcase*,<sup>87</sup> which pits the poor and underprivileged

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>82</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*.

<sup>83</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “War Porn,” *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 2005), [http://www.ubishops.ca/ baudrillardstudies/vol2\\_1/taylor.htm](http://www.ubishops.ca/ baudrillardstudies/vol2_1/taylor.htm).

<sup>84</sup> Doug Mirabello (creator), *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (USA: TLC, 2012-2014).

<sup>85</sup> Lauren Dolgen (creator), *Teen Mom* (USA: MTV, 2009-present).

<sup>86</sup> For a UK perspective on this, as well as critical usage and elaboration of the term “poverty porn,” see Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock, “Poverty Porn and the Broken Society,” *Variant*, no. 39/40 (2010), [http://www.variant.org.uk/39\\_40texts/povertyp39\\_40.html](http://www.variant.org.uk/39_40texts/povertyp39_40.html).

<sup>87</sup> David Broome (creator), *The Briefcase* (USA: CBS, 2015).

against each other for televisual entertainment of the masses. It now stands out in the open as a form of entertainment.<sup>88</sup> The signification of sex saturates even the most banal, asexual of informational categories and media domains. The popularization of terms such as "travel porn,"<sup>89</sup> "food porn,"<sup>90</sup> and "earth porn,"<sup>91</sup> for example, are a testament to this general semantic effect. These terms refer to a type of practice on a social network (particularly Reddit) which involves users sharing and commenting on the aesthetic value/pleasure derived from photos taken during travel, of meals, and of nature scenes, respectively. In fact, porn has even manifested in an oxymoronic SFW (Safe for Work) form: Reddit has an entire sub-network devoted to "SFW porn," the categories of which include a breadth of domains falling under signs of "nature," "synthetic," "organic," "aesthetic," and "scholastic" porn.<sup>92</sup>

What the abovementioned examples have in common is that they are sexualized *in sign only*, reflecting a generalized process of sexualization (and perhaps at the same time, a de-eroticization) of media. The signs of sex, stripped of referential meaning, are

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See also Kat Brown, "Reality TV Show Pits the Poor against Each Other for \$101,000," *The Telegraph*, April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/11573116/Reality-TV-show-pits-the-poor-against-each-other-for-101000.html>.

<sup>88</sup> And yet, *The Briefcase* is just a more socially accepted microcosm of even more brutal and malicious 'films' like *Bumfights: A Cause for Concern*, which pits people who are experiencing homelessness against one another in exchange for monetary compensation. Ryan McPherson, *Bumfights: A Cause for Concern* (Indecline Films, 2002).

<sup>89</sup> For example, see Simon Cable, "Britons Spend Three Hours Each Day Indulging in 'Travel Porn' as They Fantasise about Their Next Holiday," *Daily Mail*, November 2014, [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel\\_news/article-2850261/Britons-spend-three-hours-DAY-indulging-travel-porn.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-2850261/Britons-spend-three-hours-DAY-indulging-travel-porn.html). See also Joanna Rothkopf, "This Travel Porn Will Make You Want to Leave the Country Now," *Salon*, June 2015, [http://www.salon.com/2015/06/24/this\\_travel\\_porn\\_will\\_make\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_leave\\_the\\_country\\_now](http://www.salon.com/2015/06/24/this_travel_porn_will_make_you_want_to_leave_the_country_now).

<sup>90</sup> The food porn phenomenon even has its own Wikipedia page: "Food Porn," *Wikipedia*, n.d., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food\\_porn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_porn). See also "/r/FoodPorn," Social Network, *Reddit*, (2015), <https://www.reddit.com/r/foodporn>.

<sup>91</sup> See "/r/EarthPorn," Social Network, *Reddit*, (2015), <https://www.reddit.com/r/EarthPorn/>.

<sup>92</sup> "SFW [Safe for Work] Porn Network," Social Network, *Reddit*, (2015), [https://www.reddit.com/r/sfwpornnetwork/wiki/network#wiki\\_nature](https://www.reddit.com/r/sfwpornnetwork/wiki/network#wiki_nature).

unrestrained in their circulation throughout/as discourse. There occurs a “pornification”<sup>93</sup> or “pornographication”<sup>94</sup> of all sorts of otherwise asexual digital cultural artifacts and media contents. In this sense, porn even becomes a functional linguistic/visual component in the (re)production of culture itself. Free-floating throughout the digital, from one entirely unrelated domain to the next, the sign of porn acts like a universal trigger of consumerist pleasure. It (re)produces culture by provoking its digital activity, and by organizing it in ever-expanding digital archives (such as those found in various groupings on Reddit). Like more traditional pornographic forms, media that are sexualized by signs take a corporal experience (sex) involving all bodily senses of perception, and reduce it to a kind of empty ecstatic visuality. Sexuality and the corporeal becomes something representational which can be compressed into bits, reconstituted in pixels, and exchanged in a digital economy of mutually equivalent signs and images. It is dominated by overexposure, by the ruthless demand to produce and circulate the supposedly exposed real and the authentic. To borrow a term from Williams, pornographication of media is part and parcel of the general “frenzy of the visible,” which she argues hardcore porn usually entails.<sup>95</sup> This frenzy is a frenzy of effects which are rooted, perhaps, in the widespread demand for representation on the visual domains of communication and culture. Sex

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<sup>93</sup> Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen, and Laura Saarenmaa, eds., *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007).

<sup>94</sup> Although I utilize Clarrisa Smith's term “pornographication” to describe these effects, I find her critique to be lacking. Smith's demand for the term porn to refer to exclusively sexually arousing material misses the point of the digital cultural effects she ultimately points out. It seems to me that the terminology of ‘porn’ to describe media outside of its traditional domain of sexual representation (particularly in the context of the leaked photographs of prisoners from Abu Ghraib) is critically and potentially politically/polemically useful. And moreover, it accurately describes the state of media affairs, the lust affair with images. Clarrisa Smith, “Pornographication: A Discourse for All Seasons,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 6, no. 1 (2010): 103–108.

<sup>95</sup> The ‘money shot’ in porn videos, she says, is “the obsessive attempt of a phallic visual economy to represent and ‘fix’ the exact moment of pleasure.” Williams, *Hard Core*, 113.

proliferates through representational exchange, through electronic communication which occurs within the productive logics of a given digital network's production/consumption/circulation/exchange of content.

As Foucault theorized, the violence done to (and perhaps by) modern sexuality has occurred through its languages, namely, the logics developed and articulated about its identity, meaning, and nature, including the supposed signification of sex encompassed by the whole edifice of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and practice. Attempts to understand and represent the nature and truth of sexuality, to systematize and write a logos of sex, Foucault claims, in effect results in "its having been 'denatured'—cast into an empty zone in which it achieves whatever meager form is bestowed upon it by the establishment of its limits, and in which it points to nothing beyond itself, [...] except the frenzy that disrupts it."<sup>96</sup> Throughout modern history, it seems that sexuality has always undergone a cycle of unleashing and containing, between the virulent destabilization of its ontological uncertainty and the management/administration/organization of its meaning(s) by various systems/discourses/powers and forms of governance. In many ways, Foucault could not have foreseen how prophetic his assessment of sex and language actually was, nor how virulent sexual signification would eventually become in the digital. It seems that he may have underestimated the virulence with which sexual signification can be unleashed once certain technological/technical/historical restraints and material limits are no longer a concern. In short, Foucault was limited by temporal and technological context. As Friedrich Kittler articulates: "Foucault's idea of the archive [...] is identical with the library—always proceeded from the historical a-priori of writing. Which is why discourse analysis has had

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<sup>96</sup> Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 69.

trouble only with periods whose modes of data-processing exceeded the alphabetic monopoly of storage and transcription."<sup>97</sup> Foucault is methodologically limited in his history of sex by a pre-digital technological era. Sex in the digital era seems to assume a plethora of 'meager forms', regardless of whether they are sexual or not. What else is this "frenzy" Foucault describes if not the endless discourses of sexuality and the viral proliferation of sex online? Perhaps Foucault's theory of sexual signification (but not necessarily his archaeological/genealogical methods of discourse analysis) intimates the digital a bit more than Kittler gives it credit.

We ought to pause and ask the question of whether there need always be some "establishment of limits," as Foucault puts it (such as the limits established by the authority of psychoanalysis, the Catholic church, etc.), which encompass or delimit sexuality and, in effect, relegate it to various historically specific forms and categories. Need there always be a church, state, or predominant psychological dogmatism to contain and regulate sex within its configurations of power, knowledge, and meaning? Is it still accurate to claim that sex will always meet some form of dominant discursive ordering/managing/administration, which sets (and enforces) its rules, and systemically distributes/reproduces its truths? Beneath the proliferation of sexual signification in our contemporary digital era, is there perhaps a secret dream/ideal/drive of porn culture working to free sex from these limits, or working to push its transgression beyond boundaries prefigured or coded by/in signification? In the wake of such power

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<sup>97</sup> Friedrich Kittler, "Nachwort," in *Aufschreibsysteme 1800/1900*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1987), 429. The above translation is from Thomas Elsaesser, "Early Film History and Multi-Media: An Archaeology of Possible Futures?," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 24.

delimitations and governance/control of discourse, does sex move into a different kind of administrative or managerial mode?

I believe that today what we are witnessing—which may be summarized by, even if never entirely contained within the concept of virulence—is a global destruction of prefigured limits: a perpetual simulacral festival of the virtual. This is not to say there are no longer limits to what sex is or can be, but rather, that they are more localized, variant, and contingently shaped in the digital age. And could we not conceive that Foucault himself (along with the general tide of poststructural and postmodern thought) is partially to blame for this new fluid status of the sexual limit? Just as Freud's language helped inaugurate or intensify the imperative for sex to have a nature, perhaps Foucault inaugurated, through his own signification, the *imperative for its denaturing*. He reminds us that, because sexuality is ultimately entirely self-referential, pointing "to nothing beyond itself," it is, by the same token, pregnant with the possibility (if not imperative) to point to anything (and everything) beyond itself. The referential absence of sex emerges historically prior to, and as a condition of, its proliferation—its *hyper-referentiality*. Without a positive truth, substance in nature, or identifiable essence, sex proliferates in its own signification as an uncontrolled force of productivity spiraling out of its own blank ontology. Maybe Foucault had it backwards: it is not the languages of sex which have cast it into "an empty zone," but an empty zone which haphazardly, hyperactively, and multidirectionally casts the language of sex onto the world, as if in a panic to find and represent its truth. Why is there this need to *represent* sex in the first place? To excavate its 'truth' and meaning? Foucault asks in the First Volume of *The History of Sexuality*: "Why this great chase after the truth of sex, the truth in sex?" He continues: "We must write the

history of this will to truth, this petition to know that for so many centuries has kept us enthralled by sex: the history of a stubborn and relentless effort."<sup>98</sup> Foucault's object of analysis in the First Volume is not so much a history of sexuality as such, but rather a discursive history of the *will to know it*.<sup>99</sup> His history is a fragmented and incomplete one, which ultimately revolves around the question of how sex is unleashed from the unspoken, that is to say, the involvement of knowledge-power relations behind and within the "deployment of sexuality" that supersedes the repressive hypothesis. Sex is irreducible to its instinct, drive, or principle. But what Foucault ignores, or perhaps determines to be unworthy of analytical development (at least, in this particular empirical historical work), is the potential nullity of sex, which I believe is a *necessary condition for its deployment*. By nullity of sex, I refer to the profound absence of truth which enables its technologically accelerated proliferation: the seduction to know and to expose the secret of human sexuality, when the only secret is that *there is nothing to expose*. In a sense, this insight was the basis of Baudrillard's critique of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Baudrillard writes: "even if we wanted to reveal the secret we could not, since there is nothing to say [...]. Everything that can be revealed lies outside the secret."<sup>100</sup> All that can be known and empirically exposed lies outside the emptiness of sex's ontological center or core. Yet the seduction to know/see/understand the 'authentic truth' and 'real' of sex continually provokes an overproduction of signification, in one form or another, on the impossible promise of some satiability: the promise that there is a secret through which truth may be revealed. This is nowhere clearer, perhaps, than in the social norms practices surrounding

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<sup>98</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 79.

<sup>99</sup> Hence the original subtitle of book was *The Will to Knowledge (La volonté de savoir)*.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), 79.

clothing, wherein disrobing is thought of as an act of intimate exposure, or the revealing of one's corporeal and authentic bare self which was formerly hidden. As Giorgio Agamben put it: "nudity exists only negatively."<sup>101</sup> It cannot constitute a positive knowledge or truth; to expose one's nude self is to expose nothing, in a sense. Moreover, he says: "nudity can never satiate the gaze to which it is offered. The gaze avidly continues to search for nudity, even when the smallest piece of clothing has been removed, even when all the parts that were hidden have been exhibited in a barefaced manner."<sup>102</sup> Thus, Agamben writes: "You wanted to see my secret? [...] Then look right at it, if you can. Look at this absolute, unforgivable absence of secrets!"<sup>103</sup> One's authentic and supposedly true self—one's nudity—is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere; and this fact haunts every quest for desire's gratification, not only the erotic. There is mass denial here, perhaps, about what desire actually desires. As Arthur Schopenhauer understood, what desire desires is ultimately not fulfilment in/through its supposed object, but the 'relief' of its own disappearance in having been satisfied.<sup>104</sup>

This paradox of 'the secret' forms a productive feedback loop, whereby the signification of sex becomes nearly infinite. It is guaranteed to be always already reproduced and in constant accumulation. This is why today, in the digital, anything can be sex, and conversely, sex can be anything. "What's your thing?" reads the welcome

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<sup>101</sup> Agamben, *Nudities*, 57.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>104</sup> "Distance and obstacles to be overcome then represent our aim as something that would satisfy us—an illusion which vanishes when our aim has been attained [...] Even sensual pleasure itself is nothing but a continual striving, which ceases directly [once] its aim is attained." Arthur Schopenhauer, "The Emptiness of Existence," in *Essential Essays of Schopenhauer*, trans. Rudolf Dircks (US: Seven Treasures Publications, 2010), 42. See also Jacques Lacan's concept of "*objet petit a*." Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2007).

message greeting visitors to a popular pornographic social network.<sup>105</sup> And beneath it, generated in real-time, is a table populated by the most recent terms searched by the network's users: "What's your thing?" Is it "stockings," "grandma," or "sucking nipples"? How about "eye contact," "humiliation," or "police"?<sup>106</sup> The whole field of sexuality is, in effect, rendered radically open by the demand for something other than its void. Thus, sex becomes a productivist sandbox of endless possibility for the signification of sexuality and desire.

From this perspective, the virulence of sex is rooted in a lack of principle, drive, or definable/determinable instinct. Its deployment comes about because of a basic indeterminacy regarding each of these domains. And likewise, the virulence of the sexual image—as part and parcel of sexuality's deployment having reached an extreme in the digital—proliferates on this same principle of nullity. Put differently, the virulence of sex operates not on the basis of a biological/psychological principle (such as a life/death drive), but on the basis of a lack of principle altogether, or the paradox of a principle of virulence (see chapter two). Such a virulent operation of images "knows no bounds," as Baudrillard suggests,

because unlike sexed animal species protected by a kind of internal regulatory system, images cannot be prevented from proliferating indefinitely, since they do not breed organically and know neither sex nor death. And it is for this reason that they obsess us in this period of recession of sexuality and death: through images we dream of the immortality of protozoa, infinitely multiplying through contiguity in an asexual chain of progression.<sup>107</sup>

The virulence of sex—its proliferation as digital image and thorough profusion of signs in digital culture—is perhaps, then, a product of the disappearance of sexuality and the will to

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<sup>105</sup> "Fantasti.cc," Pornography; Social Network, accessed October 2, 2015, <http://www.fantasti.cc>.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 36.

infinity/immortality. Digital sex—its whole economy of signs in exchange and virulent accumulation—would belong precisely to the dream of immortality mentioned above by Baudrillard: a technological hallucination at the ends or limits of the human. “We all want immortality. It is our ultimate fantasy, a fantasy that is also at work in all of our modern sciences and technologies,” Baudrillard writes in reference to technologies of cloning.<sup>108</sup> With cloning, biological life is reduced to its genetic information as DNA: a highly compressed, yet infinitely complex digital representational mode of life which has far more in common with the world of images than the mammalian world of sexual biological reproduction. Perhaps this whole explosion of sexual signification belongs to its *will to information*, that is to say, to some underlying epistemic process by which sex is reduced to its code.

Sexuality’s radical uncertainty—its absent center—is something Baudrillard seems to loosely conceptually relate to death. The fantasy or dream of immortality works beneath sexuality’s reproduction to ontologically/ontically project the signs of immortal life in the form of information, as if the discovery of DNA could somehow allow one to reclassify the human condition along the lines of the inorganic/immortal/untethered. Such projections do, however, function to signify, reanimate, reproduce, and transform the human, but never in such a way as to actually conform to the fantasy of immortality through informationalization.<sup>109</sup> Rather, the transformation takes place within a series of appeals against, and refusals of, this nihilistic principle which hyper-saturates the world with the

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<sup>108</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>109</sup> This fantasy has been well-explored by the sci-fi imaginary. Particularly, the recent television reboot of the *Battlestar Galactica* series depicts the ‘uploading’ of human consciousness/essence. Ronald D. Moore (producer) and David Eick (producer), *Battlestar Galactica* (Vancouver, BC: Sci-Fi Network, 2004-2009).

signification of sex. The closest we get to the immortality of images, then, is an exponential viral reproduction of them, which is accelerated, perhaps, by our envy of their ontological status as immortal data/information. The accumulation of images is the most one can hope to achieve in the futility to make mortal life into something it is not, and to make sexual reproduction more than just the “traces” which remain “of everything that disappears.”<sup>110</sup>

It seems that sex—particularly as it manifests linguistically and visually online as porn (broadly defined) by assuming seemingly incoherent asexual forms and proliferating beyond all traditional limits—functions in a way consistent with the logics of digital (re)production. The increased intensity of its signification or production is another symptom/effect of its disappearance-proliferation (see chapter two). Sexuality has reached a saturated abundance of referentiality through processes that are inseparable from its fundamental absence or uncertainty. Unleashed from epistemological constraints, sex evacuates its supposed substance in the form of mere signs and images in information. Contrary to Foucault’s understanding, sex opens itself to new constraints, new limits, and thus also new Bataillean im/possibilities of transgression, but it never settles into normality, normativity, or homogeneity. The sexual normalization of the real—its social deployment as a uniform set of some discursively mediated rules, practices, and meanings—is no longer possible, strictly speaking. Perhaps this is because sex has already been thoroughly deployed, and normalized (as has ‘reality’) as the formless form of its radically open imperative—*thou must fuck and be fucked*, if only digitally (and as a function of the economy of mere/empty signs). Maybe it is in this way that sexuality came

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<sup>110</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 25.

to saturate all of reality. Sex flows into the real until the two are virtually indistinguishable. Nevertheless, their demand for distinguishability (perhaps in the form of the fantasy-reality differential) is by no means extinct, and is likely also a factor responsible for the overproduction of sexual signification.

The particular contemporary technological 'style' and intensity with which the proliferation of sex currently takes place is undoubtedly part and parcel of the fact that sexual media now share the same fundamental digital interfaces as other media. With new media, Manovich argues, media have effectively become "meta-media," because they have the capacity to "remap old media objects into new structures."<sup>111</sup> He notes that the predominant computational paradigm since at least the influence of Alan Kay in the 1970's is defined by the computer's role as a "simulation engine," or a machine which simulates (and, thus, integrates) a diverse multiplicity of older forms of media.<sup>112</sup> Explicitly pornographic content—the visual and auditory representation/depiction of sex for consumer pleasure—today most often shares a screen and device with other forms of consumer media. There is no designated 'porn machine', in other words, that would be exclusive to its consumption. Porn is leveled with and against all other media by the Internet's lowest common denominator: information. The tendency of information to collapse media into a single interface, however, is not the root of the proliferation of sex. But it is nevertheless a factor which potentially intensifies and expedites proliferation by disintegrating the contours of previous limits and boundaries between types of media. It is conceivable that the gradual collapse of media interfaces into one shared type of interface

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<sup>111</sup> Lev Manovich, "Understanding Meta-Media," in *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (Toronto; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 106.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

would have the unintended consequence of structuring psycho-social association between previously and otherwise unrelated domains of culture and human activity. The popular emergence of 'sexting' practices (discussed in the following section), for example, mark the informatic/informetric collapse of sexual, visual, and textual technological communications. Pornography, social media, film, music, gaming, word processing, and all other media forms become imbedded in the same technical computing structures. This does not mean that all of the abovementioned domains/activities/technologies have become entirely indistinguishable from one another. They have become interrelated components, which function within shared hardware interfaces, cybernetic systems, and regulatory networks.

This general structure constitutes a type of technological organization of quotidian life, the peculiarity of which is generally overlooked by everyday experience and observation. It is peculiar because all of the abovementioned domains effectively function together in a *virtualized* form as software applications. Each of these virtualized domains have been de-objectified, so to speak. Each has been abstracted, in both form and function, from the world of objects wherein one finds much greater existential and empirical interstitial distance between things, people, and activities. Virtualized objects, on the other hand, remain distinguishable only because interstitiality has also been virtualized. The distance between things exists only insofar as it is digitally representable and reducible to information. In the virtual, differentials are artificially reproduced on the level of human cognition. Because the identity of one domain or object is threatened by its reduction to information, or its 'leveling' in/by the digital, there appears all the more reason for said identity to be differentiated through signification. I would hypothesize that despite

the reproduction of differentials in the virtual, activities/applications which share the same computer, tablet, smart phone, or web browser, likely form unconscious or semi-conscious organic (and artificial)<sup>113</sup> algorithmic, cognitive, and neurological associations in relation to one another and, most importantly, in relation to the user-subject, which may be conceptualized as a kind of technical-psychological matrix of digital culture. These associations, based on various material configurations, or virtualized organizational techno-structures of shared hardware/software interfaces, may provide one additional possible direction for thinking about why sexual media tend to flood into the domains of other media types (pornification).

Most everything on the World Wide Web, from Pornhub to Wikipedia to Wikileaks, shares in a basic ideological commitment to/imperative for *exposure*. As I have developed in previous chapters, this takes place most importantly at the level of visibility, language, and signification. This overarching need to expose—the constant draw toward the “frenzy of visibility”—is seldom recognized as such or critically treated in terms of ideology, if only because its profusion has been so thorough that it has become almost entirely indistinguishable from social and cultural reality. Its value as an ethos has become almost commonsensical, if not universal (to the west, anyway). By the same token, what does reality consist of if not the sum total of its very exposure? Could it be that this ideal of total exposure, and thus also the ideal of a complete and whole reality from which human cognition draws knowledge, is ironically itself a hidden provocateur? Could this be the paradoxical idea/I of universality, which functions to provoke its own realization or

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<sup>113</sup> For a report on recent development and insight into Google's “artificial neural network” of image and speech, see Alexander Mordvintsev, Christopher Olah, and Mike Tyka, “Inceptionism: Going Deeper into Neural Networks,” *Google Research Blog*, June 17, 2015, <http://googleresearch.blogspot.com/2015/06/inceptionism-going-deeper-into-neural.html>.

actualization in the world through productive activity (broadly defined), yet all the while also tirelessly working to undermine its production? Is this the provocateur who moonlights as a saboteur? As Baudrillard asks: "What vertigo pushes the world to erase the Idea? And what is that other vertigo that, at the same time, seems to force people to unconditionally want to realize the Idea?"<sup>114</sup>

#### **4. Interrogating Exposure and Disclosure: The Lure of Transparent 'Nature', from the Simulacral Theatre to Sexting and/as Cybernetics**

It seems that the most touted ideologies of digital culture revolve around some ethos of exposure and transparency. The generalized ideology of exposure is clearly articulated in this chapter's epigraph: Zuckerberg's condemnation of the multiplicity of identity in digital culture, which I have discussed on several occasions throughout previous chapters.<sup>115</sup> The Facebook mogul echoes a common deep-seated, dogmatic belief in the inevitability of total transparency online. Moreover, he takes it as a given truism that greater exposure/transparency of truth, the greater actualization of social progress and human ethical betterment on a global scale. Since at least early cyber-libertarian discourse on information in the early 1990's, digital culture has been ideologically inextricable from ideals of exposure and radical transparency.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, May 20, 2003, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>.

<sup>115</sup> Zuckerberg quoted in Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 199-200.

<sup>116</sup> For a critical analysis of the role of cyber-libertarianism in digital discourse, see Lincoln Dahlberg, "Cyber-Libertarianism 2.0: A Discourse Theory/Critical Political Economy Examination," *Cultural Politics: An International Journal* 6, no. 3 (November 1, 2010): 331–356. See also Ramon Lobato, "Constructing the Pirate Audience: On Popular Copyright Critique, Free Culture and Cyber-Libertarianism," *Media International Australia* 139, no. 1 (May 2011): 113–123. Lastly, see Jean-Marie Chenou, "From Cyber-Libertarianism to Neoliberalism: Internet Exceptionalism, Multi-Stakeholderism, and the Institutionalisation of Internet Governance in the 1990s," *Globalizations* 11, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 205–223.

The spectacular episodes of today's political dramas take place globally in real-time. The tensions between protagonists and antagonists no longer come from the imaginations of playwrights, dramatists, or tragedians. These tensions develop and unfold on the stage of information between state agencies, public institutions, corporations, hackers/hacktivist, whistleblowers, leakers, intelligence analysts with conscientious objections, disobedient enemies of the state's digital machinery, and so on. The great tragic 'heroes' of our time are widely regarded as freedom fighters of/for information freedom and transparency, and they are widely celebrated as public defenders against surveillance and police states. These supposed tragic heroes are whistleblowers and data-liberators such as Edward Snowden and Julian Assange (editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks). They are also Internet activists-turned-martyrs such as Aaron Swartz, co-owner of Reddit, who committed suicide in 2013 after facing inordinate federal charges for the systematic download of academic journal articles from JSTOR.<sup>117</sup> To various degrees, the respective geopolitical dramas of leaks, like the information they reveal, are hyper-exposed as they play out on the digitized world stage. They unfold as simulacral theatre. This was especially the case (and, to a lesser extent, still is the case) with the mediatic drama which ensued after Snowden's NSA revelations. To the critical observer, in the months following the Snowden leaks, it often seemed as though the political drama—perpetuated, propagated, and reproduced by endless media chatter—were somehow trying to overwhelm/eclipse/bury the information revealed by it. Is Snowden an American hero or a traitor? Did he act morally or immorally? Should he be locked away for treason or awarded

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<sup>117</sup> Sam Gustin, "Aaron Swartz, Tech Prodigy and Internet Activist, Is Dead at 26," *Time*, January 13, 2013, <http://business.time.com/2013/01/13/tech-prodigy-and-internet-activist-aaron-swartz-commits-suicide/>.

a medal? In the aftermath of the leak, these more-or-less trivial questions seemed to consume public discourse as much, if not more, at times, than questions about invasive NSA programs and operations.

Consider also the case of Chelsea Manning (formerly Bradley Manning), a former U.S. Army intelligence analyst who is currently serving a thirty-five-year sentence for leaking classified documents and combat videos to WikiLeaks.<sup>118</sup> Although the content of the leak itself has remained relatively under-discussed throughout various mainstream news media and social networks, the personal drama between Manning and her former friend/infamous ex-hacker, Adrian Lamo, who originally reported to the feds that Manning was the source of the leak, was well-covered and well-rehearsed throughout technoculture.<sup>119</sup> Media consumers were, of course, most interested in this real-time/real-life reboot of a quasi-Shakespearian tale of betrayal, between a hyperreal Brutus and this very odd stand-in for Julius Caesar. Or, perhaps, it was the drama of crucifixion which drew in the digitally mediated masses: Judas Iscariot reincarnated as a hacker named Lamo, and the Synoptic Gospels reborn in hacker culture. While this drama of friendship and betrayal played out predominantly in the initial media coverage following the leak, it is worth noting an additional aspect of the case, which also eclipsed media immediately after her sentencing. The day after she was sentenced, Manning issued a press release (exclusively via NBC's daily infotainment talk show, *The Today Show*, no less) publically

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<sup>118</sup> Kevin Poulsen and Kim Zetter, "U.S. Intelligence Analyst Arrested in Wikileaks Video Probe," *Wired*, June 6, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/2010/06/leak/>.

<sup>119</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "Army Leak Suspect Is Turned In, by Ex-Hacker," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2010, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/08/world/08leaks.html>. See also Ed Pilkington, "Adrian Lamo on Bradley Manning: 'I Knew My Actions Might Cost Him His Life,'" *The Guardian*, January 3, 2013, sec. US, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/03/adrian-lamo-bradley-manning-q-and-a>.

stating for the first time that she identified as a trans woman, and no longer wished to be called by her male-assigned birth name, Bradley.<sup>120</sup>

The mediated masses, with their radical emptiness and general thirst for news and politics information (or infotainment), churn out endless torrents of polarizing discourses which are sensationally obsessed with individual actors and their actions—their personalities, their ethics, their so-called ‘justness’ or lack thereof—dragging personalities through the mud of vacuous public opinion. From the twenty-four hour static from news pundits and talking heads, to the incessant chatter from a supposed digital demos of digital networks such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook, the masses guarantee that stars and headliners like Snowden and Manning will oscillate from heroes to villains; from patriots to traitors; from Christ-like martyrs of exposure to anti-Christ figures of terrorism; from voices seeking to free ‘the people’ through truth, to reckless endangerments of public security. Endless hero-villain chatter continues such that a degree of ambiguity and a degree of doubt are almost always equally guaranteed by that dubious truism, that ever-present ‘fact’ of the fractured masses<sup>121</sup>: namely, the presence of some degree of a public “difference of opinion,” which helps guarantee and preserve the productive tensions of various discursive stalemates and social/cultural/political/ethical aporias. It is, perhaps, a general principle of mass media that there must always be present some ambiguity, heterogeneity, or minimal degree of public/publicized difference, which constitutes a sufficient condition for the constant reproduction and circulation of chatter. Such

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<sup>120</sup> Chelsea E. Manning, “The Next Stage of My Life, Press Release” (TODAY News, August 22, 2013), <http://www.today.com/news/i-am-chelsea-read-mannings-full-statement-6C10974052>. See also Verónica Bayetti Flores, “Manning Announces She Is Transitioning,” *Feministing*, August 2013, <http://feministing.com/2013/08/22/manning-announces-she-is-transitioning/>.

<sup>121</sup> See Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*.

unyielding chatter is only interrupted, it seems, by the emergence of a subsequent drama and its mass reproduction, which displaces the former drama and exerts a similar grip on the mediated attentions and interests of the digitized masses.

None of this is to claim, however, that these theatrical dramas of whistleblowers somehow constitute the core problematic of contemporary informational geopolitics and power. That is to say, although the high profile 'leak drama' often masks the contents exposed by the leak, simply lifting the veil of gonzo geopolitical theatre should not be thought of as a revolutionary act. This whole digital politics of whistleblowing and leaks dogmatically celebrates transparency, and also noble ideals about universal exposure of truth and achieving democratized access to free-flowing information. At certain limits, this ideology of exposure renders a crucial and self-critical perspective on information network technology in the contemporary geopolitical context nearly impossible. The freedom of information and freedom of sexual expression celebrate the liberty of communication, but in so doing, they tend to obscure their own underlying obligatory aspects: the obligation to produce information; the obligation to render the unseen seen and the silent heard; the obligation to represent, document, and make accessible all things; the obligation to express publicly and without limit, to communicate and transmit constantly through a field of perfect connectivity that is never subject to cessation or hiatus; the obligation to expose everything with the blinding lights of fiber optic communication and increasing concentration of pixels, until all that remains is a pure and limitless light, or a dream of supplanting the perfect dark, or of drowning out the total silence from before the Big Bang. "Let there be light," such that all that is and can be—reality as such—may be exposed. But also, "let there be nudity," such that there is guaranteed some impetus to expose the

supposed hidden object to the gaze. And lastly, “let there be images,” such that the pleasures of the human world can never be confused for the thirsts of the animal world; for man seeks more than carnal thirst—he seeks *carnal knowledge*.

If exposure is an ideological force, then where does it come from? It may be useful to begin with a brief note on sexual *disclosure*, which I believe to be a figure in which ideological exposure is rooted, and from which it is potentially abstracted. By sexual disclosure I mean whatever remains of the curiosity and excitation involved in being a corporeal witness to the bodily-real of the other. Nancy describes disclosure in terms of “the newness of each inflection, of each joint, the unforeseeable lifting of a cheek, of a hip, a palm or neck. The unknown toward which this rises and moves.”<sup>122</sup> That is, the dense manifold of ways in which the unknown discloses itself, through the body, *as unknown*, and not as some definite substance, truth, or ‘carnal knowledge’, and, especially, not as something to be visually or linguistically represented. As a microcosm of human becoming, sexuality has no limits here and, for that matter, it has no name—it remains within the boundless void, a no-thing which discloses itself ephemerally through the bodily real of an-other no-thing, in the spontaneous movement of flesh. Flesh here is not observed, watched, recorded, or studied in search of finding some meaningful pattern or of decoding some kind of hidden secret. On the contrary, the disclosure of flesh reveals only the flesh-in-itself, and does so without reference to some external meaning. Disclosure signifies only its nullity, or simply that there is nothing to signify. This relates to a Heideggerian understanding of truth as “disclosedness” (*aletheia*).<sup>123</sup> A generalized

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<sup>122</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Birth of Breasts” in Sue Golding, ed., *The Eight Technologies of Otherness* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 143.

<sup>123</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155–182.

Heideggerian epistemology postulates an understanding of truth which is non-representational, and has little to do with the activity of revealing and cognitively capturing a positive knowledge-content hidden beneath some veil. In terms of nudity, Agamben points out (without any explicit reference to Heidegger) a familiarity between disclosure and a historically common type of exegesis in Christian theology. According to Agamben, the theological meaning of disclosedness is:

to know nudity is not to know an object but only an absence of veils, only a possibility of knowing. The nudity that the first humans saw in Paradise when their eyes were opened is, then, the opening of truth, of "disclosedness" (*a-letheia*, "un-concealment"), without which knowledge would not be possible. [...] To see a body naked means to perceive its pure knowability beyond every secret, beyond or before its objective predicates.<sup>124</sup>

Thus, to use the term 'sexual disclosure' is perhaps misguided. From this perspective, what is disclosed is not the sexual object or some measurable/intelligible/representable substance of sexuality/carnal knowledge, but rather the very ontological and epistemological conditions for disclosure: knowability of/and being(s). The truth which is exposed in the disclosedness of one's nudity is not representational, it is ontological.

None of this is to say, however, that the realization/imposition of a form or practice of disclosure is some kind of 'authentic' alternative to the intensified reproduction/over-signification of sex which swarms all circuits of human meaning. That disclosure may pose a non-representational challenge to exposure makes little difference: because it harbors a drive toward the authentic ontological real (the Being of a being), it is still a germ by which the orgy of transparency has been unleashed into digital culture. Thus, I hypothesize that sexual exposure occurs as a kind of mediatic mutation or 'bastardization' of the ephemerality/irreducibility (and, ultimately, the nullity) which disclosure discloses.

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<sup>124</sup> Agamben, *Nudities*, 81.

The near-prophetic genius of Benjamin is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his observation of disclosure's destiny to become exposure via technologies of mass reproduction and the loss of the auratic.<sup>125</sup> According to Benjamin, "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" results in the destruction of existentially/historically unique aura/essence of a piece of art.<sup>126</sup> He goes on to claim: "every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction."<sup>127</sup> What Benjamin never explicitly calls attention to, however, is the ironic impetus of this urge: the lure of the aura—its 'call' to be disclosed, its supposed existential authenticity—is a key ingredient in recipe for its disappearance. All of this is to suggest that disclosure, as an ideal modality of non-referential/non-representational and supposedly immediate (not mediated) inter-corporeality, becomes externalized by media, and thereby enters into a logic of technological reproduction and signification in an attempt to render disclosure somehow tangible, real, permanent and reproducible. No epistemology escapes the stage/form/logical functions of mediation/representation on its way to becoming simulation. In Baudrillard's words: "The principle of simulation wins out over the reality principle just as over the principle of pleasure."<sup>128</sup> Indeed, sexuality in the digital seems to demand its own simulacral reproduction just as virulently as (if not moreso than) pleasure demands desire's fulfilment through the object. At any rate, this general process involves the transfiguration (and, thus

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<sup>125</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, first Schocken paperback edition (Schocken, 1969), 221.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 152.

also, the deterioration) of the immediacy of disclosure into a (hyper-)mediated form which is central to the digital: *exposure*.

The normalization and total/totalizing informational deployment of sexual exposure has also been met with a multitude of emergent anomalies (insofar as systemic anomalies are still possible), instances of short-circuiting, and widespread *disinformation*/mass-confusion. For example, the digital practices popularly referred to as “sexting” have resulted in several bizarre new cultural, economic, political, and legal formations and aporetic manias/panics.<sup>129</sup> The term ‘sext’ is a neologism/portmanteau of ‘sex’ and ‘text’ (as in SMS mobile messaging). It has become a sort of catch-all word for any sexually suggestive/explicit textual or visual digital interchange of hyper-mediated exposure between networked subjectivities. With the turn to increasingly mobile, miniature, and computationally powerful communication technologies witnessed in the past decade or so, sexting has become a highly popular intimate practice (or set of practices) within digital culture. Likewise, the topic of sexting has become a widespread staple of public discourse on sexuality, constituting what some have referred to as a cultural crisis or ‘panic’.<sup>130</sup> Concerns about this supposed panic, which span widely from academic discourse to popular culture, have generally tended to fall somewhere within the domain of

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<sup>129</sup> It is worth noting, however, that although they take new peculiar forms with contemporary new media technologies of exposure, one should not lose sight of the long history of discursive cultural and moral panics surrounding sexuality. I propose that we look at contemporary forms of sexual panic as hyper-extensions of earlier forms within less proliferated media contexts. For a discussion of the history of ‘sex panics’ relating to the digital present and the role that ‘authenticity’ plays in its reproduction and politics, see Gilbert H. Herdt, “Introduction: Moral Panics, Sexual Rights, and Cultural Anger,” in *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights*, ed. Gilbert H. Herdt (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 28-29. For additional background and discussion, see also Cristyn Davies, “Proliferating Panic: Regulating Representations of Sex and Gender during the Culture Wars,” *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (April 8, 2011): 83-102.

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, Amy Adele Hasinoff, *Sexting Panic: Rethinking Criminalization, Privacy, and Consent* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

normative critique, and have largely focused on the staggeringly high rates of teens and young adults who admit to participating in some form of sexting practices.<sup>131</sup> Reflecting an odd convergence between ethical concerns about pedophilia victimization and accelerated forms of production/access/distribution made possible by digital media, new discursive oddities/labels such as “self-produced child pornography” have recently emerged.<sup>132</sup> The accumulative effects of the incessant imperative for exposure in digital culture have begun to blur the contours between the traditional categories of the sexual victim (the supposedly pre-sexual/innocent child as a subject of exploitation) on the one hand, and the sexual deviant (or, perhaps, the ‘pervert’ of psychoanalytic theory) on the other. In a number of publicized instances, minors who have participated in sexting have been charged and prosecuted for the production, distribution, and perhaps most absurdly, the possession of child pornography.<sup>133</sup> In these instances, *child-victims are paradoxically prosecuted as their own offenders.*

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<sup>131</sup> See “Sex and Tech: Results From a Survey of Teens and Young Adults” (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, December 2008), <http://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/sex-and-tech>. For an analysis of this study and its media impact, see also Leigh Goldstein, “Documenting and Denial: Discourses of Sexual Self-Exploitation,” *Jump Cut* 51 (2009), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/goldstein/>.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. See also Feona Attwood, “Sex and the Media,” in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, ed. Karen Ross (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 464.

<sup>133</sup> Several examples: (1) Johnathan Drew and Mitch Weiss, “Sexting Case Highlights Quandary over Child Porn Laws,” *Associated Press, The Big Story*, September 24, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/802238c3b59e4ee09fdfabf77199ca58/sexting-case-highlights-quandary-over-child-porn-laws>. (2) Jacqui Cheng, “Teens Send Nude Pics to One Other [sic], Face Kiddie Porn Charges,” *Ars Technica*, January 14, 2009, <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2009/01/teens-send-nude-pics-to-one-other-face-kiddie-porn-charges/>. (3) Mike Bruner, “‘Sexting’ Surprise: Teens Face Child Porn Charges,” *MSNBC.com*, January 15, 2009, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/28679588/#.Vt0UvJwrKUK>. (4) “13-Year-Old Faces Child Pornography Rap,” *UPI*, October 15, 2004, sec. Top News, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2004/10/15/13-year-old\\_faces\\_child\\_pornography\\_rap/UPI-51111097881716/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2004/10/15/13-year-old_faces_child_pornography_rap/UPI-51111097881716/). (5) “Girl, 12, Charged With Distributing Nude Pic of Classmate,” *Foxnews.com*, June 24, 2008, 12, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/06/24/girl-12-charged-with-distributing-nude-pic-classmate.html>. (6) “Outdated Child Porn Law Clashes with Technology: Sexting Teens in Legal Trouble,” *Columbia Daily Tribune*, November 18, 2015, sec. News,

Sexting is symptomatic of what I referred to above as the transition from the porn industry to pornographic culture insofar as it constitutes a form of highly localized, amateur-oriented or 'prosumer' user-production of porn.<sup>134</sup> The pornographic image—the terms of its production, consumption, and dissemination—is no longer predominantly governed and regulated, strictly speaking, by an industry-locus, but rather it is cybernetically administered by user activity protocols.<sup>135</sup> The bizarre circumstances of 'self-produced child porn' reveal a legal and cultural edifice that is entirely anachronistic/unequipped to deal with the logics of hyperreal re/production and the degree of productivist bombardment, overexposure, and radical transparency of mediatic communication practices of everyday life.<sup>136</sup>

Everything has become obscene and pornographic because everything is now subject to the demands of relentless exposure. Exposure is the stuff of porn and of sexting—an ideologically rampant and viral orgy of the object-image. Hyper-mediated forms of exposure such as sexting phenomena are the central ideological mechanisms of pornification. It involves a constant demand for signified meaning or visual/auditory

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[http://www.columbiatribune.com/news/outdated-child-porn-law-clashes-with-technology/article\\_e06fe845-e9a8-594e-a19d-ffd4f1d182b9.html](http://www.columbiatribune.com/news/outdated-child-porn-law-clashes-with-technology/article_e06fe845-e9a8-594e-a19d-ffd4f1d182b9.html).

<sup>134</sup> For a discussion regarding the question of whether the act of sexting constitutes a kind of pornographic (or, at least, mediatic) content production, see Amy Adele Hasinoff, "Sexting as Media Production: Rethinking Social Media and Sexuality," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 4 (June 1, 2013): 449–465.

<sup>135</sup> Regarding the roles of cybernetic protocols in 'control societies', see Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004). Relating to considerations regarding informational appropriations of user activities, see also Brunton's definition of Internet spam as that which "exploits existing aggregates of human attention." Finn Brunton, *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 201.

<sup>136</sup> For a unique analysis bridging legal and psychoanalytic discourses, see Matthew H. Birkhold, "Freud on the Court: Reinterpreting Sexting and Child Pornography Law," *Media & Entertainment Law Journal* 23 (April 17, 2013): 897–941. Traditional media forms like news journalism seem equally anachronistic and confused with the digital ecology/economy of the pornographic image. For an analysis, see Gretchen Soderlund, "Journalist or Panderer? Framing Underage Webcam Sites," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 5, no. 4 (December 2008): 62–72.

reference to the irreducible corporeal movements of disclosure. Thus, the immediacy of disclosure can be no ontological challenge of 'authenticity' to the representational epistemic order, nor can it truly pose a critical alternative to the obscene. This is because a desire or impetus for authentic/real disclosure—such as the disclosure of the nude body of a being—is always already adapted/appropriated by the forces of exposure. Exposure is disclosure hyper-intensified, systematized, and forced to signify and accumulate. An encompassing ideology of sexual exposure requires that bodies be directed/directive, purposeful, and functional. Nudity is herein no longer involved in a process of revealing an irreducible or unrepresentable interplay between the bare materiality of bodily animation and its unknowable, and equally material, exteriority. Just the opposite, nudity is here the visual pretext for *carnal knowledge*. Sex is thus something to be known, to be represented and understood. Not only the cogito, but flesh—the body itself—must carry the burdens of speech and signification: *each of its movements must signify*. The body itself *becomes* language. Sex must function toward some end or purpose in bad faith and bad conscience. It must be ascribed cultural meaning and moral truth, yet remain indifferent to exactly what kind. It must occupy an historical place on some imaginary continuum of progress and power, yet remain indifferent to where exactly that lies. The mobilized exposure of sex involves sex's begging its own indifferent (re)production, demanding always that some content or substance fill its indefinite void. The imperative of sex, which typifies the productivist imperative of digital culture, is a demand to be categorized,<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> The 'search feature' of pornographic websites is discussed as an important component of the imperative to categorize sex in Manuel Bonik and Andreas Schaale, "The Naked Truth: Internet Eroticism and the Search," in *C'lickme: A Netporn Studies Reader*, ed. Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, and Matteo Pasquinelli (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007), 77–88, [http://www.networkcultures.org/\\_uploads/24.pdf](http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/24.pdf).

(eventually) normalized, and abstracted from its non-essential ambiguity. It must be a substance or energy real enough to be measured, repressed and unrepressed, sublimated, relegated, or liberated. Unlike the act of disclosure, which puts no significant demands on sex, in pornographic exposure, sex now exposes its nullity like a vacuum that pulls in all surrounding meaning, accumulating ad infinitum. It is perhaps even to this general ethos/pathos of exposure that sexuality most owes its phallogentric legacy: where the contours of sexuality are shaped by the abstract desire to violently gain access, to penetrate a previous unknown.

The 'ideological' force of exposure is, therefore, most notably rooted in the same substratum as that of representation. It involves the same basic drive to manifest objects and appearances, and to render the world real. Today's pornography (and cultural pornographication) may very well amount to the combined effects of two basic, yet intensified elements of production from time immemorial: a hyper-amplified mode of exposure on the one hand, and, on the other, a mode of hyper-efficient representationality, the processes and operations of which are programmed to produce copies of the exposed/exposable real—and particularly, of sexual reality—and as such, over-produce and over-accumulate simulacra. Porn typifies this output of simulacra: it is the consequence of a mode of representation, the momentum of which envelopes and liquidates every object in its path. It is no wonder, then, that digital media are virtualized, compressed into and contained by/as information. How could such an unsustainable mode of productivist accumulation be sustained otherwise?

The cult of exposure assembles in rituals: the pornographic ecstasy of expressing one's 'authentic' identity on a social network, or using digital tools to find one's 'true self',

or engaging in technological means to find/maintain/cultivate only the most optimal, realest, and most meaningful human connections. Rituals of exposure are not the exclusive rites of technophiles, however. The rise of cybernetic systems and globalizing machinery have also spurred various forms of digital discontent and pseudo-negativity, which not unlike the ecstasy of digital communications, are motivated by a romanticized/fetishized sense of authenticity and the cult of exposure. The neo-luddite seeks to escape the dregs of digital culture—the supposed inauthenticity of superficial consumerism, digital communications, and technological tetheredness—by seeking out the signs of pleasure, fulfillment, and authenticity of the so-called natural world. And what/who purports to be more naked, radically exposed and transparent than nature herself? Because the modern conception of nature is broadly and generally supposed as that which is unadulterated and always already *given*, it constitutes, ironically, the fetish par excellence of industrialized/postindustrial culture.

Ultimately, the desires that draw the neo-luddite toward nature are also the mechanisms at work within digital culture. One tries to escape the urbanized world and get 'back' to nature, as it were. But this urge to return to nature is little more than a manufactured ruse of accumulated signs recycled and thrown into (re)circulation, which are continually reproduced/reformatted/recycled through the very systems, technologies, and communication networks from which one seeks refuge in nature in the first place. Those who reject/refuse/negate digital culture in search of the unadulterated authenticity of nature will find exactly that: they will be conveniently met with a pre-packaged solution to their digital diaspora—an assemblage of resurrected signs circling a void, operating to simulate and stimulate the meaning of a nature that has already disappeared. Baudrillard

articulates the draw to reconnect with, or 'rediscover' nature in the following passage from

*The Consumer Society*:

The 'rediscovery' of Nature, in the form of a countryside trimmed down to the dimensions of a mere sample, surrounded on all sides by the vast fabric of the city, carefully policed, and served up 'at room temperature' as parkland, nature reserve or background scenery for secondary homes, is, in fact, a recycling of Nature. That is to say, it is no longer an original, specific presence at all, standing in symbolic opposition to culture, but a *simulation*, a 'consommé' of the signs of nature set back in circulation—in short, nature *recycled*.<sup>138</sup>

Although he does not use the term explicitly, what Baudrillard seems to provide is a critique of nature-as-authenticity. The popular desire to rediscover nature, or to get back in touch with it, is a kind of collective hallucination of the authentic real. Perhaps because 'nature', for all intents and purposes, radically precedes the emergence of language and 'rational thought' faculties, it necessarily evades all human capacity of cognitive/representational understanding. It belongs to the (dis)order of myth and magic, made extinct (yet also violently reanimated) by the "disenchantment" of Enlightenment.<sup>139</sup> By definition, nature would therefore be that which is unintelligible and irreducible: a kind of a priori alterity, which is a negation of the typical meaning of the term 'nature' in everyday parlance as well as its general meaning in positivistic sciences throughout the history of modernity. At some point in post/modernity, the supposed 'givenness' of nature ruptures: "Enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible in its estrangement. In mind's self-recognition as nature divided from itself, nature, as in prehistory, is calling to itself, but no longer directly by its supposed name, [...] but as

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<sup>138</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 100-101.

<sup>139</sup> See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1-34. See also Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 12-13. See also my discussion in chapter 1.

something blind and mutilated."<sup>140</sup> Perhaps this is nature's revenge: nature's unknowable alterity envelopes the human world in the form of an incalculable army of its own failed, mutilated clones. But did 'nature' ever really even have a chance, or the potentiality, of being anything other than an abstraction of itself, its own failed clone? From the very moment nature becomes a sign and is posited as a coherent representational entity, it is buried beneath the hallucinogenic effects of an indeterminate cataclysm of rationalization, calculation, and objectification.

The drive 'back' to nature's state of supposedly originary authenticity implicitly assumes an essence of nature which is based on the sole reference available: its objective foreignness in relation to the world of human subjects. Nature becomes merely the negative image, or alterity of culture, society, civilization, technology, and language—in short, those distinctively human domains thought to interrupt, rupture, distort, and mangle the original, authentic state of nature. All of this is possibly not much more than a violent retrojection. But that which constitutes what we call nature, as Baudrillard intimates, is this retrojection's sum of effects—a swarm of signs in circulation around a great unknown and unknowable void. When nature itself refuses to speak, or to signify, or to be *exposed* by the call of language, the circulation of signs accelerates into a kind of tailspin. Thus, the demand on nature to have a nature at all—a demand exerted by the ideological force of exposure—launches into an automated process of hyper-signification, whereby nature is continually produced and reproduced as signs of the real and the authentic. Lefebvre warns of these deceptive effects: "The rule of this world is founded [...] on transparency. It leads, however, into opacity and into naturalness (not that of 'nature', but that of the signs

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<sup>140</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

of nature). This is a fraudulent world, indeed the most deceptive of all worlds—the world-as-fraud.”<sup>141</sup> The lure of nature as some open, transparent, wholly exposed state or object of referential purity can only lead to the continued propagation of the paradoxical challenge posed by the impossible secret. This is a truism applicable to an umbrella of interrelated lures discussed throughout this chapter: authenticity, the real, the true, and the known. The promise of transparency always leads to its opposite. In fulfilling its promise of transparency, nature opens itself to expose only its nullity. Such bare emptiness can do little other than provoke its negation: no sooner than the instant in which nature's ‘truth’ is exposed, it has already been swarmed by and flooded with a deluge of signs and incessant meanings. The tragic destiny of our beloved transparency is such that the greater the effort for its realization, the greater opacity/obstruction is summoned.

Herein, the production of nature conforms to a mode of production which is essentially pornographic. Nature no longer has any power to negate the pornographic as a kind of absolute purity in the face of the profane/artificial/inorganic human technoculture: nature, as a sign, belongs to the very same relentless circuitry of representational exposure as sexuality and porn. Both nature and porn face an unremitting demand to access ‘the real thing’. We want to see nature disrobed, rendered nude, like the object of desire—we want to know her impossible secret. In both porn and in nature, there occurs an intensified and indiscriminate demand for referentiality, authenticity, and exposure. In sex, as in nature, production experiences an exponential increase in the rate of signification, and in the implosive accumulation of signs within a given system's circuitry. In this regard, one should make no major distinction between the technological modes of reproduction

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<sup>141</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 389.

involved in such diverse tasks as conducting archival research, writing a short email, sexting with a lover, performing in pornographic video, simply choosing to leave one's smartphone behind in the city during a hiking expedition in order to 'reconnect' with nature. Each of these examples belong to the order of exposure, and to a global dominion of transparency, the transcendence of which seems impossible. Here, I am in philosophical and sociological agreement with Baudrillard who, in a very Nietzschean passage, writes:

At issue is a culture of obscenity that cannot but tear away all veils—according to the imperative of transparency. At issue is the profound jealousy of a ragged culture at all the ceremonial cultures—those cultures whose signs enwrap them, whereas our culture is laid bare by its signs themselves. [...] At the end of the process all that will be left will be lightweight, inoffensive signs—advertising signs or marks of the disembodied fanaticism of fashion. That, no doubt, is where the story of the veil will end.<sup>142</sup>

This desperate, panicky decadence we refer to as digital culture eventually surmounts to the lightness of insignificant signification and total detachment of signs—the final, irreversible actualization of hyperreality, in which the wrath of exposure has not only burned all meaning (this has likely already occurred), but the desperate grabbing and pulling at the veil finally ceases. The secret is finally quieted. Will this be the moment of our extinction? Or is the scenario possible without human annihilation?

Socially, historically, culturally, and politically impaired and desensitized from cognitive awareness of its cybernetic domination, the subject takes on a cog-like function serving digital economies of exposure. This is no longer a world of industrially reproduced and manipulated subjectivity, but of a perfectly operational virtual/virtualizing Leviathan. In the remaining division on cybernetics, the analytical task at hand is to begin to theoretically sketch out the operational contours of this Leviathan, some of its central

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<sup>142</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V: 2000-2004*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 89.

concrete and abstract forms and functions, and lastly, to consider what, if anything, remains of the human and its political potentiality in his wake.

This task will by no means be comprehensively fulfilled in the next and final chapter. In fact, it really only begins to skim the surface of developing a theory of the cybernetic/virtualized condition. That said, it lays several important foundations for future analysis and critique. Particularly, I begin with a focus on the reproductive mechanisms of materiality and immateriality throughout digital culture and mediatic discourse, and how this relates to what I argue is a fascist social configuration. Much of the first part of the chapter is concerned with providing a critical analysis of familiar concepts, principles, laws, and practices which are prevalent throughout digital culture, and which also provide unlikely insight into our cybernetic condition. The chapter concludes by extending Baudrillard's theory of gestural systems in *The System of Objects* as a framework for understanding this cybernetic condition, and also, in order to develop a critical theory of virtualization and the virtualizing technological relations which are implied by said condition.

## Part III

### Cybernetic Virtualization

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## Chapter Six

# Cybernetic Economies of Digital Productivism: Subjectivity and Technologies of Virtualization

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Man has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him, so to speak, organizing his surroundings and thus appropriating his actions.

-Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Economies of Digital Reproduction: Principles and Implications

In order for productive, communicative, and consumptive informational networks to function, they must have a differential by which to be measured and legitimated. This is a principle central to digital reproduction. Because the category of 'digital' means little without 'analog', the latter must be continuously reproduced within the productive processes of the former. The analog may precede the digital temporally and logically, but never becomes obsolete because the digital continually reproduces its own historical precedence and technological preconditions. Hence, digital consumer/professional/bureaucratic/organizational technologies often appear as intensified versions of their analog counterparts. For example, the filing cabinet is digitized into instantaneously recallable data directories; the telephone is digitized into the hyper-communicative smartphone; and the logos and digital graphics of E-mail interfaces maintain anachronistic images of postage stamps, envelopes, etc. Analog practices bleed into the digital, with no apparent functional importance: it is still common place, for

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (Verso, 2006), 53.

example, to answer the phone with 'hello?', as if we do not almost always know who is calling.<sup>2</sup>

Based on this general principle of digital technology's reproduction of the analog, we may identify two inextricable tendencies involved in digital reproduction or, at least, in the reproduction of its conditions for production: 1) the tendency to reproduce technological precedence as a differential within its own functionality, and 2) the tendency to differentiate from the preceding technological artifact by means of intensification (by various degrees and measures).

These tendencies are not exclusively active in terms of the (re)productive processes of the digital-analog distinction, but rather, more broadly, they involve the binarism that characterizes digitality as such. Just as the digital reproduces signification of the analog, the supposed *immateriality* of digital production must always also reproduce, in addition to its supposedly original informational 'content', some sort of *material referent* that grounds it and gives it meaning. Likewise, the supposedly 'disembodied' virtual tends to reproduce the bodily/corporeal. Virtual practices—which predominantly take place in the domain of visual and linguistic digital communications—function to stimulate various significations of corporeal experience.

This productive binarism does not involve the reproduction of a particular and inherent content. Rather, it entails the necessity of the reproduction of some kind of

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<sup>2</sup> John Koenig calls this "reverse shibboleth." He notes its 'authenticating' functions in the following definition: "n. the practice of answering a cellphone with a generic "Hello?" as if you didn't already know exactly who was calling—which is a little like the egg requirement that marketers added to early cake mixes in the 1950s, an antiquated extra step that's only there to reassure you that it's an authentic homecooked meal, just like grandma used to make." See John Koenig, "Reverse Shibboleth," Online Dictionary of Neologisms, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, (2013), <http://www.dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/post/31777406378/reverse-shibboleth>.

unspecific content or form, suggesting a demand for the continual production of its meaning (yet indifferent to the nature of that meaning). Pornography need not reproduce a certain kind of sexuality, for example, but it must reproduce sexuality in some form or fashion (as we saw in chapter five). What, if anything, does this principle of technological reproduction imply about the mode of production in which it is involved?

One hypothesis might explain this modality of reproduction in terms of some kind of crisis response of capital. One might claim, for instance, that capital, particularly since the labor crisis of the 1970's, faces certain limitations on the production of value. In order to transgress the limitations of material production, capitalism begins to employ alternative means of value production outside of the "real" of material labor. Moving beyond an industrial model whereby value is crystallized into material products via the exploitation of human metabolic labor, capital shifts to a supposedly immaterial, informational model. Here, value is no longer exclusively crystallized, but also *virtualized* through the 'cognitive'<sup>3</sup> activities of user-machine interfaces that are characteristic of digital networked technologies. According to this model, value may be produced not only through traditional labor processes, but also through the uncompensated activities of consumer media.

Because digital technology has culturally developed concomitantly with the development, employment, and innumerable social consequences of various neoliberal strategies for disciplining and managing labor (e.g., outsourcing, credit, finance, etc.), there is probably a correlation between the proliferation of informational technology and the tendency of capital to revolutionize techniques of value production. These tendencies of

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

digital (re)production may reflect, to some extent, what Christian Marazzi refers to as the “externalization of value production,” or the relegation of its processes to domains that are outside of traditional materialist forms.<sup>4</sup>

The aforementioned tendencies of digital reproduction, however, are not altogether reducible to the nuanced techniques of value production witnessed in post-industrial capitalism. They are also deeply rooted in the linguistic and epistemic legacies of western civilization, which I have theoretically developed throughout the course of the previous chapters. What I want to suggest here is this: the tendency of the digital to reproduce and intensify/transform the analog reflects a hyperreal mode of (re)production. In this mode, value is reproduced through the panic of its absence.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, it is only against the cultural and epistemological backdrop of an encroaching, if not eclipsing, doubt in regards to the inherent value of value that value can be reproduced. The hyperreal marketing rhetorics of ‘immateriality’ in digital culture, which encompass everything from mobile operating systems to cloud computing platforms, by definition constitute a deficit of material referentiality. As a kind of microcosm of the global productivist system, this manufactured deficit is a hyper-functional mechanism which is central to the reproduction of signified referentiality as such.<sup>6</sup> It works to continually engender in subjects an anxious demand for meaning, which is a crucial variable involved in digital production.<sup>7</sup> Sign logics

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<sup>4</sup> See the concept of “externalization of value production” in Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 63.

<sup>5</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Telos Press Publishing, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> This framework of reproduction, which emphasizes the role of absence, is consistent with Baudrillard’s third ‘successive phase of the image’. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 11-13.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the discussion regarding this topic in chapter 1, see Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: This Is What Democracy Looks Like,” in *Communication and the Economy: History, Value, and Agency*, ed. Joshua S. Hanan and Mark Hayward (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 153-154.

of digital immateriality may play an important role in an intensified realization of the “reproduction of conditions of production.”<sup>8</sup> The human thirst for meaning thus takes a distinctively ideological form as what appears (at least in the beginning) as a core function of the reproduction of value via digital technologies. This panicked reproduction (of corporeal and material signification, alike) constitutes a broader thirst for reference, verifiable reality, and *real* value. Everywhere one looks, the real is signified in some way. It is almost inescapable, as Lefebvre intimates: “The real demands realism. Is there anyone who does not want to be ‘realistic’, to be anchored in the real, to know it and to have a hold over it?”<sup>9</sup> A realist imperative dominates the production of discourse (as well as the discourse of production). That is to say, one must, above all, practice the vacuous discipline of reality: ‘keep it real’, ‘get real’, undergo a ‘reality check’.

There is a kind of nostalgia operating within this productivist cycle: the supposed past—the memory of the authentic and the original (as I discussed in the previous chapter)—is resurrected and greatly amplified towards the amorphous ends of production. Moreover, this is precisely the principle by which sexuality is virulently reproduced in its own signification too. That is to say, the fundamental nullity of sex, its absence of any kind of referential security, pushes the sign and image toward an almost nostalgic archeological drive to ‘recover’ its truth and meaning from some lost unknown. In this sense, digital reproduction is not exclusively or comprehensively defined by its role as a means of profit or intentional capitalist strategy of value production. It is also entangled in the logics of representation. Digital reproduction is encountered in a historical situation

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<sup>8</sup> See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London; New York: Verso, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans. John Moore (London; New York: Verso, 2008), 194.

wherein everything is found to be untethered from the real. Thus, I argue, it is most centrally characterized by a ceaseless demand for the real and, by extension, its production and accumulation in/as information (see chapter four).

## **2. Tendencies of Immaterialization and Re-materialization: Fascist Configurations of Ideology, Technology, and Power**

At least at the level of culture, digital reproduction presents itself as having achieved a machinic mastery of representational efficiency.<sup>10</sup> Across multiple sectors of the culture industry, the digital functions to translate and integrate a supposedly original presentation of some immaterial content into a compressed, digital format. Put differently, the reproduction of digital media involves the abstraction/extraction of content from materially concrete commodities. Digital media economies virally circulate these abstracted representational artifacts of cultural meaning, which would otherwise need to be reified/written/inscribed onto a commodity object for the purposes of mass distribution, e.g., a song onto an album, a motion picture onto film, a story onto a book, etc. As if by magic, processes of digital reproduction supposedly abstract the 'immaterial content' from its former home in the commodity object, codifying it to fit a compression format/standard, and rendering all content equivalent by reducing it to its most basic form: information. The content is rendered 'purer' by virtue of its abstraction from the object, but it also becomes less pure by certain qualitative standards of 'authenticity', such as the judgment of standard audio compression techniques for their 'lossiness' or 'losslessness'.<sup>11</sup> Emergent digital forms of media content also revive/reproduce, through a

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding techniques of cybernetic feedback through which this efficiency is achieved, see discussion of Facebook and negative-positive feedback systems in chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of "lossy compression," see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 52-55.

kind of functional deficit, more antiquated forms. Hence, the mp3 plays a role in reproducing vinyl today, for example. As coded information, digital content remains a somewhat cheapened representation of an original. Yet, in another sense, it also becomes a kind of purer representation, insofar as it constitutes a representation at all, because it ends its exclusive tie to/embodiment in the commodity object. From this perspective, the (commodity) object may constitute a particularly deep historical root of digital content, codification of meaning, and the hyper-networked global circulation of information.<sup>12</sup> Once something is reproduced digitally, it becomes a kind of 'free range' content, the materiality of which is limited to its impermanent inscription on hard drives. The key point to consider, however, is that digital/virtual/informational content remains every bit as material as the analog form which came before it, but *it presents itself as immaterial*. This general process is perhaps the first epistemological principle of the 'ideology of immateriality' apparent in some of the most important trends and rhetorics in recent consumer technology, such as cloud computing.

One may object to the idea that immateriality is reproduced in the digital by means of abstracting information from material objects, and this may be for good reason. After all, multimedia consumer devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones now serve, in a sense, as umbrella commodity objects, and thus remain material referents for informational content. Furthermore, digital reproduction always reproduces some form of the analog in order to maintain its 'weight' in reality. This is partially why, as I briefly suggested above, in the music industry, previous forms of media content never entirely

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, even, the digital has no independent logic of its own, and can be thought as the complex amalgamation of productivist effects stemming from an intensified logic of the commodity object. This suggestion remains speculative, however, and falls outside the scope of the current project.

disappear into technological obscurity, but on the contrary, new media seem to continually foster a paradoxical (and nostalgic) revival of old technologies like vinyl records (even if only in niche markets).<sup>13</sup> As the title of a recent opinion piece in *The New York Times* announced: "Digital Culture, Meet Analog Fever."<sup>14</sup> Everywhere, dated technologies and forms of media once thought obsolete now find popular resurrection. In addition to the popularity of vinyl records in the music industry, for example, the book industry has also recently undergone processes of reproducing analog media. Ironically, after arguably transfiguring the book/publishing industry to a ship-to-home model over the past decade or so, and, in effect, rendering it more difficult for more traditional corporate and independent physical book stores to stay in business, Amazon.com has recently announced plans to open hundreds of brick and mortar stores.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, as information storage and retrieval methods become increasingly externalized from popular consumer devices (the personal computer and local hard drive) to sites of mostly state and corporate governance (the data center), the cyber-population of consuming masses is less likely to treat its computational communicative devices like traditional commodity objects, but instead like perceptual windows to a virtualized world: translucent screens, behind which there is no processor, only pure informational content. The physical medium, as it were, becomes thinner and thinner, less and less visible. The

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<sup>13</sup> Megan Geuss, "Vinyl Records Are Still Riding That Big Comeback Wave, Sales up 38% in a Year," *Ars Technica*, July 2, 2015, <http://arstechnica.com/business/2015/07/vinyl-records-are-still-riding-that-big-comeback-wave-sales-up-38-in-a-year/>.

<sup>14</sup> Rob Walker, "Digital Culture, Meet Analog Fever," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2015, SundayReview edition, sec. Opinion, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/opinion/sunday/digital-culture-meet-analog-fever.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/opinion/sunday/digital-culture-meet-analog-fever.html?_r=0).

<sup>15</sup> Greg Bensinger, "Amazon Plans Hundreds of Brick-and-Mortar Bookstores, Mall CEO Says," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2016, sec. Tech, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-plans-hundreds-of-brick-and-mortar-bookstores-mall-ceo-says-1454449475>.

ideal which shapes the goals and developmental trajectory of digital technology is to realize a reality wherein the medium itself has disappeared into absolute mediatization: a kind of 'post-medium' age. We are forced to ask of this trajectory an old and difficult question, familiar to anyone working in VR research: will the interface disappear?<sup>16</sup> According to the logic of Zeno's paradox, the interface will most likely never disappear entirely: the interstitial difference/distance between the real and the virtual—these digital reincarnations of the Tortoise and Achilles—is continually shrinking, or splitting. However, by virtue of these splitting processes, according to Zeno's paradox, never shall the two meet. Through processes of technological change and development, interstitial distance between the real and the virtual is forever shrinking, but incapable of total collapse, technically speaking. This is not to say, however, that the interstitiality between so-called 'reality' and 'virtual reality' is incapable of becoming so infinitesimal that it is no longer phenomenally perceivable. In a *practical* sense, perhaps, the interface/medium may very well eventually disappear before our eyes.

The paradoxical goal here is to achieve greater objectivity by means of the annihilation of objects. The dream of digital culture's technical/technological realism—which is at once obsessed with a thirst for corporeal referentiality, but also the everyday immaterialist aesthetics and experiences of perceived fluidity of information—is to collectively lose the object altogether. This reflects, perhaps, a will to return to the supposed purity of Platonic forms. I would argue that the hidden or unspoken object/objective of the pixel race is precisely this disappearance of objects: the realization of complete seamlessness between the screen and its exterior. The materiality of media is

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<sup>16</sup> For a response in the negative, see Myron W. Krueger, "Foreword: The Interface Will Not Disappear," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 8, no. 1 (January 1996): 1–3.

more likely to be taken for granted. The “black box”<sup>17</sup> keeps getting dimmer, edging ever-closer to an ironic situation in which we find that the entire digital ecology/economy is largely constituted by the activities of technologically illiterate masses (alongside hyper-literate A.I. and algorithmic network processing). The key point here is that objectivity and subjectivity are now re/produced in the domineering capacity of simulation—as virtualized sign-values exchanged throughout the same digitally cybernetic circuitries.

In the above examples of the popularity of vinyl albums and the resurgence of the brick-and-mortar bookstore, the physical/analog/material commodity or media content is reproduced, perhaps, only as a ruse, or simply as a different kind of means to generate its digital simulacral signification. The object evaporates into the informational ‘cloud’, or so we are led to believe by various ideological outputs of digital commercialism and popular culture. “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps in the age of cloud computing and the virulence characteristic of porn culture, one encounters everything as always already dissolved by capital, cremated by signification, pulverized by compression, and leveled by the ceaseless production and exchange of information. The analytical center of the onion of Marx’s political economy—the material commodity-object—would be no exception to these effects. Indeed, all that is solid melts into air in the digital. But, contra Marx, today’s ‘humanity’ seems perhaps even less compelled to face its “conditions of life.” The collective emergence of reflective and critical consciousness, as it were, could not have been a less accurate prediction of

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<sup>17</sup> See W. Ross Ashby, “The Black Box,” in *An Introduction to Cybernetics* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1956), 88–117.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 476.

today's global social configuration of techno-power and the kinds of moral and political agencies (or lack thereof) that are continually (re)produced within it. Marx did not foresee the hyperreal or the virulence of digital production. It seems that nothing 'melts into the air' without first reproducing its sign-value on the ground.<sup>19</sup>

"Digital immateriality" is a terrific term to describe the ideology par excellence of the contemporary world and the form/stage of capitalism which characterizes it. The deployment of digital immateriality does not constitute an ideology in the sense of simply masking or distorting a fundamental structural real (the material world). Rather, it plays a fundamental, if not symbiotic, role in reproducing the material. Furthermore, the reproduced materiality that results from the deployment of the digitally immaterial may function, to some extent, as a mechanism which grounds or re-anchors the virtual/information in the material-real. The digital reproduces the analog within its fabric and, more broadly, it reproduces immaterial content as sign-objects of equivalent ontological constitution and objective value to commodity-objects. For example, copyright campaigns which tout lines such as the infamous "you wouldn't steal a car, why would you steal a movie?"<sup>20</sup> are strategic attempts (in the interests of industry) to ground digitality in some form of belief in the analog or, at least, in some degree of faith or a will to believe in

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<sup>19</sup> See Baudrillard, *For a Political Economy of the Sign*.

<sup>20</sup> This particular rhetorical line was produced in 2004 by the Motion Picture Association as part of a series of supposed 'public service announcements', which attempted to deter the digital piracy and distribution of films. It was widely distributed as an opening sequence (which could not be skipped by consumers) imbedded in many DVD-format motion pictures. The quote—and, more broadly, the entire anti-piracy campaign—largely backfired, and was received on social networks as an anachronistic and blatantly hypocritical piece of entertainment industry propaganda. The sequence eventually reached the infamy of meme status, and it became a widely mocked and spoofed object of parody and ridicule which was expressed throughout a multitude of communicational circuits of digital culture. See "Piracy, It's a Crime," *Know Your Meme*, 2005, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/piracy-its-a-crime>.

the material value of digital property. In this way, the ideology of immateriality reproduces the ideology of materiality, and vice versa. One seems to signify the other.

Ideological immateriality in digital technology may benefit the interests of capital by helping cultivate a new method of value generation. But by extracting cultural content from corresponding commodity objects, it also risks abstracting that content from the weighty real of a legal, ethical, and economic system that is hell-bent on worshipping, protecting, and reproducing the *material edifice of property and ownership*. Nonsensical terms like “E-book lending,” “digital rentals,” and “used MP3s” represent the propagandistic efforts of various corporate tentacles of the entertainment industry to rematerialize informational media, as if flows of information risk eclipsing (and halting) flows of capital.<sup>21</sup> In general, the discourses surrounding copyright, “digital rights management” (DRM), and intellectual property rights appropriate and exploit the ambiguities of an ill-suited, pre-digital legal edifice in order to continuously *ground and inflate* the value of the digital in the analog and, likewise, that of the immaterial in the material.<sup>22</sup> This protects and sustains the value of digital content by rendering it equivalent to traditional material property in the eyes of the law. Yet a consumer purchase of digital content is rarely granted the same liberty as that of the traditional commodity: through various techniques of DRM, one no longer purchases content, but instead, conditional and limited access to it. In effect, there is a shift in

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<sup>21</sup> See Leigh Beadon, “The Copyright Lobotomy: How Intellectual Property Makes Us Pretend To Be Stupid,” *Techdirt*, <http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20130410/12051322665/copyright-lobotomy-how-intellectual-property-makes-us-pretend-to-be-stupid.shtml>.

<sup>22</sup> For a critical discussion of DRM, see Joe Karaganis, “The Ecology of Control: Filters, Digital Rights Management, and Trusted Computing,” in *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*, ed. Joe Karaganis (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2007), 256-280. See also Jeff Perez, “GM, Ford, And Others Want to Make Working on Your Own Car Illegal,” *Yahoo!*, April 22, 2015, sec. Autos, <https://www.yahoo.com/autos/gm-ford-others-want-working-own-car-illegal-160000229.html?nf=1>.

consumerism from a paradigm of *ownership* to one of *access*. Because a digital file in itself is nearly infinitely reproducible, DRM mechanisms work to artificially ensure that the means of production do not become publically owned, so to speak.<sup>23</sup> Like various other forms of digital media contents, digital texts, as Tredinnick explains, "are algorithmically produced at the point of consumption; their reproduction occurs through copying the instructions for recreating them during the cycle of transmission and use."<sup>24</sup> Thus, if one were to purchase a digital media content such as an e-book as an ownership commodity like one would an analog physical book, one would also be purchasing the means of its reproduction, in a sense. DRM emerges as a means of managing and controlling this technological means of reproduction self-contained in a media file.

Generally speaking, strategies such as DRM and access-based consumer exchange models constitute (and, also, are re-constituted by) a fundamental contradiction between immaterial and material reproduction in digital capitalism. Operating beneath the ruses of liberal rights-based ethics and a commitment to protecting the creative work and intellectual property of researchers, inventors, artists, and various content producers, there occurs a proliferation of efforts, especially in the western world, in the domains of policy and law, to ensure longer Copyright terms and extended protections for big content companies, and to set harsher standards for policing and prosecuting violations of

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<sup>23</sup> As part of its structural constitution, every digital file has a self-contained 'means of production', in a sense. Its informational content can be copied and distributed indefinitely, assuming the exterior material world of networked hardware infrastructure maintains relative stability. For more relating to this concept, see D.E. Wittkower, "Revolutionary Industry and Digital Colonialism," *Fast Capitalism* 4, no. 1 (2008), [http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/4\\_1/wittkower.html](http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/4_1/wittkower.html). Regarding the notion of infinite reproducibility.

<sup>24</sup> Luke Tredinnick, *Digital Information Culture: The Individual and Society in the Digital Age* (Oxford, England: Chandos, 2008), 69. See also Jonah Peretti, "Notes on Contagious Media," in *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*, ed. Joe Karaganis (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2007), 162.

corporate ownership rights.<sup>25</sup> This is most notably evident, perhaps, in the leaked content of the recent hyper-secretive free trade agreement proposal known as the “Trans-Pacific Partnership,” which, among other things, could significantly extend patent protections for pharmaceutical companies and further expand the transnational legal weight of corporations on a massive scale.<sup>26</sup> This reproductive and binary-differential relationship between materiality-immateriality explains the strange fact that under the same general technological design paradigm, and around the same time when we witness the emergence of cloud computing and externalized data storage, we see also several new material practices and technological configurations emerge out of the digital: 3d printing, smart homes, and the so-called “Internet of Things.”<sup>27</sup>

At this juncture, it is possible to identify and formalize one central contradiction functioning at the intersections of labor, value creation, and digital (re)production: processes of immaterialization and re-materialization occur in tandem with one another, and in the service of the same overarching system of production. The contradiction is itself, however, a simulacrum—a *trompe-l'œil*. Any attempt to reconcile/resolve this contradiction socially, politically, or economically will most likely result only in an intensification of its reproduction in/as various representational forms/failures.

On the one hand, the ideology of immateriality, such as that which is mobilized in the marketing strategies of cloud computing, is deployed as a means of disempowerment,

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<sup>25</sup> See Cory Doctorow, *Information Doesn't Want to Be Free: Laws for the Internet Age* (New York: McSweeney's, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> “TPP Treaty: Intellectual Property Rights Chapter” (WikiLeaks, October 2015), <https://wikileaks.org/tpp-ip3/>.

<sup>27</sup> See Luigi Atzori, Antonio Iera, and Giacomo Morabito, “The Internet of Things: A Survey,” *Computer Networks* 54, no. 15 (October 2010): 2787–2805. See also Hermann Kopetz, “Internet of Things,” in *Real-Time Systems: Design Principles for Distributed Embedded Applications* (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2011), 307–323.

disinformation, and alienation from the material processes of information technologies. The 'cloud' is a ruse of immateriality that is deployed to the benefit of multifarious corporate overlords in Silicon Valley (and beyond), and sustained by a massive material infrastructure: the veiled mysteriousness of energy-hogging data centers and fiber optic networks. By reproducing an ideological immateriality, corporations claim to protect user data by de-localizing and relegating it to external management facilities. Thus, the decentralized myriad interests of capital are able to maintain increasingly perfect cybernetic control of informational flows, and to ensure the productive conditions of the current over-concentrated and radically uneven distribution of monetary benefits from its instrumental usages of property rights and ownership protections. From this perspective, it is not enough to critique only micro-practices and strategies like DRM as legal/social/ethical missteps.<sup>28</sup> Rather, I postulate that they constitute instruments/techniques of cybernetic governance; they represent the non-subjective (but also, the hyper-subjective) ideological activities of techno-social reproduction, control, and domination.

By 'naturalizing' information, so to speak, and through convincing people to believe in a kind of everyday immateriality of its flows, the cybernetic circuitry comprising global informational exchange demands greater quantities of value to be produced via various forms of consumptive and communicative digital cultural activity. With phenomena like beta testing and crowd sourcing, users unknowingly provide what is essentially a kind of

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of copyright, DRM, piracy, and intellectual property as "mechanisms by which" digital culture involves a technological social and cybernetic "regulatory strategy," see Tarleton Gillespie, *Wired Shut: Copyright and the Shape of Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 10-12. See also Thomas Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media: Between Emancipation and Commodification* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015).

free labor, a situation which clearly generates power and profit for big content companies. On the other hand, paradoxically, materiality is also reproduced towards similar ends and interests. The re-materialization of the immaterial serves to anchor information in the analogical world of commodity objects where property ownership is protected by the much more black-and-white facticity and tangibility that (mass-produced) commodity objects possess. In rhetorics of re-materialization (such as those mentioned above), digital media content is referred to in bad faith, as if it were equivalent to such a tangible object.

Undoubtedly, there are myriad empirical factors within the domains of industry, state, and culture, involving innumerable causal networks of social tension and competing ideological and economic interests. These specificities determine the processes and circumstances through which multifarious processes of immaterialization and re-materialization unfold. There is no centralized organizational order or uniform strategy behind the deployment of either. Yet, in contradiction, they form a functional productive whole—a complex digital constellation of techno-power held together by what I would argue is, in principle, a kind of digitally and cybernetically actualized fascist social configuration.

Fascism, as Benjamin describes it, “attempts to organize the [...] masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right [to change property relations], but instead a chance to express themselves.”<sup>29</sup> The ideological reproduction of immateriality that permeates digital culture, coupled with the re-materializing effects of the edifice of

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, first Schocken paperback edition (Schocken, 1969), 241. [Bracketed content is my addition].

intellectual property rights and the like, constitutes (at least, in Benjamin's sense of the term) a *distinctively fascist configuration of power*. Firstly, the ideology of immateriality seems to imply a general liquidation of property into information. It belongs, perhaps, to a general tendency to submit possession, storage, and management of one's personal data to the services of corporate entities. This tendency implies the fascist motif of surrendering to a universal/izing system. One's online activity, no matter its specific content, is constantly producing data; yet that data is never given the status of property, nor is the right of the user's ownership of it ever protected. On the contrary, data is automatically 'mined' from everyday user activity, collected and assembled into an organized system of operations, loosely anonymized, and eventually sold by entities like Google and Facebook to the highest bidder, or to government entities in exchange for preferential treatments. Parallel to this, user metadata accumulates to no definite end or purpose in the secretive mass surveillance practices of government bureaucracies such as the NSA. Today, even one's genotype is up for grabs, as consumer DNA analysis services such as "23andMe" (a company in which Google has, unsurprisingly, invested a sizeable amount of money) solicit saliva samples in order to render vast networks of genetic data, providing interpretation of one's DNA for the low cost of around a hundred bucks (and the right to sell the purportedly anonymized data to interested parties).<sup>30</sup> There are already several instances of the policing of genetic data, most of which involve its retrieval in the secularist-holy name of justice and security.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See "23andMe: Find out What Your DNA Says about You and Your Family," 2015, <https://www.23andme.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Kashmir Hill, "Saw That Coming: Cops Are Asking Ancestry.com and 23andMe for Their Customers' DNA," *Fusion.net*, October 16, 2015, sec. Real Future, <http://fusion.net/story/215204/law-enforcement-agencies-are-asking-ancestry-com-and-23andme-for-their-customers-dna/>. For a more detailed critical analysis, see also Gary T. Marx, "Soft

We are collectively conditioned by a crass realism to accept that this is simply how the Internet 'works', how it stays 'free', and how it generates growth and serves the evangelical dogma of ceaseless development and accumulation. Common narratives tend to suggest/assume that the current global technological configuration is determined a priori, as an unshakeable and inherent structure of digital media as such. Furthermore, the online masses, which are continually reproduced as a pseudo-*demos*, are conditioned to think that digital activity is intangible, immaterial, and cannot, in principle, be upheld and protected as property. The exception, of course, is typically encountered when the protection of 'immaterial property' serves the interests of corporate profits. When this is the case, the immaterial tends to undergo a magical transformation back into the realm of materiality in order to become protected property. The veil of distinction between the material and immaterial is lifted, and an instantaneous equivalence of the two is conveniently employed at the very moment when the ruse of this differential ceases to work in favor of those parties who artificially reproduce it. Because all exchanges have been virtualized, this is no feat of divine transubstantiation, but rather, it is a relatively simple mechanism of information's radical and instantaneous fungibility. Protected by the rematerializing effects of efforts such as digital rights management, the property structure of society remains statically ironclad and radically uneven in its distribution, all the while persisting against the backdrop of a proliferating digital culture which is built on the ethos of freedom of information and of expression. Because the constructed immateriality of

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Surveillance: The Growth of Mandatory Volunteerism in Collecting Personal Information--'Hey Buddy Can You Spare a DNA?'," in *Surveillance and Security: Technological Politics and Power in Everyday Life*, ed. Torin Monahan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 37–56. On the role of security in the general recipe of surveillance, see also Torin Monahan, *Surveillance in the Time of Insecurity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

digital media helps to engender an understanding of information as a free flowing substance, unbound by physical limitation and generated from the bottom-up, it tends to encourage and reinforce a kind of “Web 2.0” expressivity that has been systemically instituted in order to regulate social relations and reproduce the status quo.

Again, this is a fundamentally fascist configuration whereby the digital masses (of the so-called liberal democracies of the western world, at least) have been given a kind of ‘absolute immaterial freedom’ in exchange for their absolute material domination. In effect, the freedom to express and to disseminate information continually produces output data which the system absorbs, augments, and transfigures into value. Everyday subjects in this predicament are subjected to forces of constant mediation and remediation; their constitutions are worked and re-worked by representational flows of information; their bodies are disassembled and reassembled by a radical plurality of cultural signification; their politics are scrambled, coded, and recoded by a vast algorithmic, aporia-inducing machinery. Subjects become nodal bodies, networked bodies. Kroker and Kroker write: “the rapture of the fully exposed, fully circulating data body celebrating its escape from now superseded conceptions of privacy. Data flesh wants to be random.”<sup>32</sup> However, is it so much that ‘data flesh’ wants to be random, or that it has no other choice?

The user-subjects reproduced within such a fascist digital culture are placed in an impossible position, wherein they are guaranteed the absolute right—and perhaps even a kind of obligatory freedom—to generate data and expressively engage in/with/through media, yet they have only the semblance of freedom when it comes to effecting change in

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, “Code Drift,” *CTheory*, Code Drift: Essays in Critical Digital Studies, April 14, 2010, [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=633](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=633).

predominant social configurations and distributions of power, property, ideology, and information.

### **3. Mass Reproduction and Reproduction of the Masses: Representational Technologies and the Mechanical Roots of Digitality and Cybernetics**

We should consider that this fascist mode (insofar as it constitutes a mode) of reproduction was already germinating in the early days of mass-mediatization. With the mechanical reproduction of film, Benjamin writes, "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology."<sup>33</sup> Over a century before cloud computing hid its materiality beneath a global onslaught of information, filmmakers worked to hide the material elements of film's production in order to immerse viewers in the immaterial experience of images. A film must be clean of any evidence of the equipment used to produce it, as Benjamin notes. If one becomes aware of a camera, microphone, or lights, for example, one's fragile suspension of disbelief is broken, and the artifice is revealed. The immediacy of perception collapses into the distance of representational images. One ceases to be able to experience *the immediacy of the mediated image*.

By the time of early film production, processes of technological remediation were starting to render the immediate experience of reality but an instance to be visually captured and technologically represented/reproduced—an instance of the real that was represented within the "more real than the real" of what was destined to become mediatic hyperreality.<sup>34</sup> The rapidly advancing technological means to isolate, capture, and

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 233.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 99.

represent animated life on film, along with the efficiency with which these representations could be produced and distributed for mass consumption, abruptly ruptured western reality by introducing a new capacity of phenomenal experience: to experience the immediate in/as the mediated image, however illusory or artificial it may be. If an omnipresent entity were to take an all-encompassing historical survey of film, spanning from the first silent features to the contemporary blockbusters churned out by the entertainment industry, it would become clear that the technical means of film—the “height of artifice”—developed, quite ironically, according to of a kind of realist program/scheme/regime. And with it, perhaps, there developed a program of cultural realism along the lines of mass demand/thirst/desire for immediacy and authenticity. Short of such a totalizing survey of film history, this point is suggested by the origin stories and foundational myths of cinema. Consider the famous myths and stories about the 1895 early short film, *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*.<sup>35</sup> In a single continuous shot just under a minute long, the film documents/captures/represents what would today appear to be a banal phenomenon: a train entering a station. The camera is, of course, invisible in the shot, and placed in a position onlooking the train's entrance. The first public showing of the film, as the story goes, sent its audience into complete panic, causing many to evacuate the theater. According to this almost neo-Platonic story as it is commonly told, the audience members, overwhelmed by the realism of the moving image, were unable to discern immediate reality from its representation on the big screen.<sup>36</sup> Whether this event

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<sup>35</sup> Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, *L'arrivée D'un Train En Gare de La Ciotat* (Société Lumière, 1895).

<sup>36</sup> The audience in the story is reminiscent of the alienated inhabitants who occupied the depths of Plato's cave. It is poetic that the representational course of the west, which, arguably, was set by Plato with his metaphysics of form explored by the cave allegory, would not only culminate in the advancement of visual representation via film technology, but also, that such a foundational story in

ever actually took place has been called into question by several cinema scholars.<sup>37</sup> But even if the story exists only as a “founding myth,” nay, *especially* if it exists only as such an origin story, it speaks greatly to the underlying cultural, technological, and aesthetic importance of the qualities of realism, immersion, and immediate experience in the historical development of film. The naiveté of the film parallels another (non-)event (which was arguably more culturally impactful) in the world of radio: the infamous audio broadcast of Orson Welles’ *The War of the Worlds*, which caused mass hysteria and panic amongst its listeners who, unaware the broadcast was fiction, believed the world was being invaded by aliens.<sup>38</sup>

These innocent experiences with historically nascent media appear remarkably alien to most people living in today’s ‘developed’ and hyper-networked world. Today, in the “HD” media age of increasingly accelerating framerates, and the race to consolidate pixels from “1080p,” to “1440p,” to “4k,” to “8k” and beyond, it seems almost unimaginable that one could find oneself overwhelmed by the realism of a silent black-and-white film such as *L’arrivée*. It is as if an insatiable desire for the real draws the film industry (and perhaps visually oriented media in general) infinitely closer to achieving a perfectly identical relationship between film and reality, between representation and presentation. The mediatic world of today is an almost perfect inversion of the realities of *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* and the panic-inducing broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. Most

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the folklore and history of film’s emergence would result in a kind of redux of Platonic origins. See Plato, “Republic,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1132-1155.

<sup>37</sup> For example, see Martin Loiperdinger, “Lumière’s Arrival of the Train: Cinema’s Founding Myth,” *The Moving Image* 4, no. 1 (2004): 89–118.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion regarding the history and impact of the event, see A. Brad Schwartz, *Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles’s War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015).

people are today far less likely to be shocked, disrupted, or disoriented by the realism of mediatic representation. In fact, it seems that the exact opposite is the case: we are more impacted by the cinematic qualities of reality than the realist qualities of cinema. Take, for instance, the countless claims in the residuum of the 9/11 attacks which articulated the event retrospectively as somehow film-like, cinematic, or "like a movie."<sup>39</sup> No doubt, the commonplace of such sentiments suggest a far cry from the shock and enchantment of film, but rather, they are symptomatic of hyper-mediated, over-mediatized masses. These are the masses of a virtualized culture of control, in which the spontaneous world event is strictly forbidden unless its formation is the result of being controlled, regulated, and artificially deployed *by* industry and *for* industry. Regarding 9/11 as a rare instance of the seemingly endangered event, Baudrillard proclaimed that: "Throughout the stagnation of the 1990s, events were 'on strike' [...]. Well, the strike is over now. Events are not on strike any more."<sup>40</sup> In its immediate aftermath, perhaps, it was difficult for the masses to recognize the 'real' weight of 9/11 because of this longstanding strike. 9/11 felt like a movie to the masses who, in lieu of world events, have been systematically fed endlessly by entertainment media. The terrorist attack on the twin towers thereby constituted a kind of radical exception to a long line of monopolistically administered quasi-events: the cinematic simulacra of staged events, produced in Hollywood, and fed to the bored and hungry masses at the end of history.

Yet despite the commonly expressed difficulty of grasping the shock of the real deployed on 9/11, everywhere media seek out greater and wider realism. In a sense, even

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<sup>39</sup> Christina Rickli, "An Event 'Like a Movie'? Hollywood and 9/11," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 10 (2009), [http://copas.uni-regensburg.de/article/viewArticle/114/138#\\_ftn1](http://copas.uni-regensburg.de/article/viewArticle/114/138#_ftn1).

<sup>40</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 3.

the most surreal, abstract animated film seems to seek out this realist fulfillment. This is not to say that it does so by means of achieving representational accuracy and visual believability, but by technically cultivating a forgetful sense of immersion and engendering certain experiential subject-postures, which encourage audiences and movie consumers to lose themselves in even the most phantasmagoric images and scenarios. At work behind the latest animated films from Pixar or Disney, for example, is the ironic fact that the imaginary is *actualized/realized* by the magical machinery of increasingly concentrated pixels and accelerated framerates. Even the most fantastical media artifacts and contents are subject to being recut, remastered, remixed, recycled, re-released, and re-rendered in high definition.

The general ideal of (cinematic) media, then, has tended to involve the trend toward purer immediacy of visual (and also auditory) representation. This trend is perhaps part of a broader will to immersion, or an abstract and variable drive to lose oneself in the displays of ocularcentric mediation, such that the real and the image are virtually indistinguishable and the audience becomes one with the screen. As Steven Shaviro reminds us, however, this realist trajectory is by no means a clear and simple continuum. Moreover, the question of the real/realism in cinema is rarely a one-dimensional question of representational accuracy: in a sense, the camera always captures "the crude real" (and does so historically, I would add, with increasingly higher pixel density and framerate through time).<sup>41</sup> However, it is something altogether different for a filmmaker to also "affirm the power of the real, to keep it from degenerating into mere *realism*."<sup>42</sup> Shaviro's conceptual

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<sup>41</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 69.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

differentiation between 'the crude real', 'the power of the real', and 'mere realism' is an important and interesting *aesthetic* consideration. Generally speaking, the type of realism to which I am referring most closely resembles the 'mere realism' Shaviro describes: the adherence to a blank and empty principle of an accurately represented real. Put differently, this describes a general and virulent will to realism, authenticity, and authorship. Yet, Shaviro also grants the possibility of a type of distinct and 'powerful' realism (perhaps of the auteur). Manovich articulates the core of this difference in his concept of "synthetic realism." He writes:

"Realism" is the concept that inevitably accompanies the development and assimilation of 3-D computer graphics. In media, trade publications, and research papers, the history of technological innovation and research is presented as a progression toward realism—the ability to simulate any object in such a way that its computer image is indistinguishable from a photograph. At the same time, it is constantly pointed out that this realism is qualitatively different from the realism of optically based image technologies (photography, film), for the simulated reality is not indexically related to the existing world.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to recognize that the qualitative distinction between these two types of realism implicitly relies on the belief in a distinction between representation and simulation. In other words, the distinction made here is between the cinematographer who must, to some degree, first capture/represent the raw or "crude real," versus the 3-D graphics designer who starts with no such index or reference, but works within a self-contained/self-referential circuit of simulation. But if one accepts, following Baudrillard, that representation tends to give way to simulation, then is there really much reason to assert the difference in these two realisms?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Manovich, *Language of New Media*, 184.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983).

I assert that there is an overarching, broader type of realism which shapes an order of exposure and immediacy. Each of Shaviro's above three categories of the cinematic real—the crude real, the powerful real, and mere realism—hold in common a drive or desire for access and exposure. The drive towards increased immediacy is fulfilled in part, at least, by means of the hyper-intensified (re)production of its differential: mediation. Wherever one finds a heightened drive/desire/demand for realist immediacy, one will also likely encounter a proliferation of mediation. Ironically, it seems that, in today's world, the drive for immediate connectivity is the primary impetus for mediation/mediatization. The cultural and technical history of film, therefore, unfolds as if to give new shape to an archive of effects emanating outward from Zeno's dichotomy paradox: the 'next generation' of film technology will always constitute some revolutionary transgression of distance between the image and the real. Yet the distance can never be completely trekked; it is, rather, split again and again, indefinitely by each new film and innovation in filmmaking and film distribution/displaying/viewing. The distance is never entirely collapsed, but rather, each of its supposed poles—the real and the artifice—is effectively ideologically reproduced with each new development and contribution. The entire historical process of film (re)production is hyper-accumulative, in this sense, and thus forms a hyper-real constitution: an accumulated 'cultural heritage' of images driven by the ideal of immediacy, and by a broad (and generally unrecognized) commitment to the real and the world of appearances. In short, I simply wish to point out the abstract form of informational and representational accumulation, parallel to the material domain of more concrete forms of ever-accumulating objects. The modalities of virulent accumulation, in/as/through communicative/linguistic sign chains of digital culture, then, are understood

here in terms of their multifaceted ideological allegiance, if not total obedience, to *the world of production* and its fascist reproduction and hyper-rational cybernetic administration/deployment.

The scale of productivist accumulation (of the cinematic-real) is, of course, entirely beholden to the technical and material capacity of reproduction and dissemination at any given point in its history. The technological capacities of modern industrial capitalism which made possible the mechanical mass reproduction of film and, more generally, the work of art, have also enabled and engendered the *reproduction of the masses*. The latter is equally restrained by historically specific technical and material capacities and limitations. By the era of mass industry and the 'mastery' of mechanical techniques, social reproduction reaches a peak of instrumental efficiency never before witnessed. In their theoretical development of the "culture industry," Horkheimer and Adorno articulate this general tendency of mass-produced cinema alongside its reproductive social effects:

The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry. The familiar experience of the moviegoer, who perceives the street outside as a continuation of the film he has just left, because the film seeks strictly to reproduce the world of everyday perception, has become the guideline of production. The more densely and completely its techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in cinema. [...] Mechanical duplication has become entirely subservient to this objective. According to this tendency, life is to be made indistinguishable from [...] film. Far more strongly than the theatre of illusion, film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination—contained by the film's framework but unsupervised by its precise actualities—without losing the thread; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality.<sup>45</sup>

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the seamlessness between film and the so-called real world which the film industry hopes to achieve, reproduces social, political, and

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<sup>45</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 99.

economic complacency, and the subject-consumer's impotency, obedience, and submission to its techno-fascist system/atization. It reproduces a kind of fascist hyper-mediated politics (or lack thereof) of domination. Moreover, the culture industry—and perhaps the form of mechanical reproduction as such—generally tends to naturalize and reproduce the techno-socio-economic status quo in all of its unevenness. In effect, this amounts to a reification/concretization/reproduction of the *given* reality, i.e., the *bourgeois* reality, which has been preconfigured and reconfigured by discourse. Through the “conformist” mechanisms of mass reproduction and distribution, images of reality become cybernetically standardized and algorithmically conditioned in the minds of the masses.<sup>46</sup> At some point after becoming subjected to ceaseless feedback stimulation, reality loses its perspectival plasticity, and history loses its future. A chaotic and aporetic hyperreality displaces both. The faculties of human imagination that were once thought capable of dialectically mediating reality, and shaping a better world, are totally overwhelmed by the mystifying and accumulating representations of the real, to the point that no real is any longer discernable from its representational sign or image. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this is a situation of profound loss, mourning, and lamentation. Conversely, for Baudrillard it is situation which is so radically unavoidable, fatalistic, and universally deployed, that mourning itself becomes a kind of simulacral production. Because it is no longer clear what, if anything, has been lost, all that lamenting this situation could possibly hope to do is to perform a nostalgic projection/retrojection of some imagined objective or subjective center of the real.

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<sup>46</sup> See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

At any rate, the possibility of this “mass deception” arrives historically with the possibility of mass exposure and the logics of mechanical reproduction.<sup>47</sup> The irony here is that reality is *narrowed* and *limited* because the possibilities of distribution and exposure have been *widened* and *opened up* to the masses.<sup>48</sup> It is perhaps here, in the realm of mechanical reproduction, that fascism finds its first modern clue to salvation, and the seedlings of contemporary liberal virtues like openness, transparency, and freedom of information, are given an outlet for mass expression (and thus, also, for mass pacification and social appeasement). One might suggest that the hyper-mediated fascism of today's world is rooted first in the fact of such expressive outlets, and second in their imperative. The voices of the masses are no longer forcibly repressed but actively demanded by power, such that the social expression of a given instance of suffering, oppression, or injustice is rendered indistinguishable from the global hum of similar outcry. As Baudrillard puts it, “Emancipation from the veil, sexual emancipation and the emancipation of trade are the drip-feed of global domination.”<sup>49</sup> This, of course, describes the cult of transparency discussed in the previous chapter, and also, the ways in which demands for exposure/de-veiling come to shape our cybernetic domination under the shapeless

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<sup>47</sup> For Virilio's consideration/analysis of some technological possibilities and effects of mass exposure and real-time technologies of compression-transmission vis-à-vis 'videoscropy', 'telescropy', and 'microscropy', see Paul Virilio, "Indirect Light: Extracted from *Polar Inertia*," *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 5–6 (1999): 57–70. See also Virilio's concept of the “tyranny of real time” in Paul Virilio and Philippe Petit, *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview by Philippe Petit*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Michael Cavaliere (New York: Semiotext(e), 1999), 87.

<sup>48</sup> As Baudrillard understood, the more we speak of the democratized masses, who have been 'opened up' to free information, representation, and supposed expression, the more likely we are to encounter their radical absence: to find that “*their representation is no longer possible*. [...] They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested. The referendum [...] has been substituted for the political referent.” Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V: 2000–2004*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 52.

regime(s) of signification which such demands continually engender, intensify, and reproduce.

If there is a continuum of governance to be found between the mechanical and digital ages, it perhaps runs along the lines of the mediatic advancement of fascism, as Benjamin understood it. It seems that the logics of digital reproduction are inextricable from those of the mechanical world. Moreover, it seems that the digital was built, in part, on an amplified technical, cultural, and social logic of mechanical reproduction. The operations of the former are constantly involved not only in reproducing digital media content, but also in the reproduction of the latter (at the very least, in the form of its sign-image). Just as the digital always seems to reproduce the analog in some form or fashion, so too does digital reproduction have a mechanical component: a constant legitimization/value production established by the virtual's relationship to the material-real.

In Benjamin's pre-hyperreal (or, perhaps, *proto*-hyperreal) landscape of mechanical reproduction, the relationship between mass-produced and distributed *representation* and unrecorded/unrepresented, "equipment-free"<sup>50</sup> *reality* has, in effect, been inverted. Representation proliferates and comes to constitute the very fabric and substance of social/cultural/political/ethical reality. It thus ceases to be representation in the strictest sense, but rather, it is now the swarming accumulated elements of the representational edifice. The terms for truth set by Plato—namely, the terms of *aletheia* that were put in motion within his cave of shadows, and which Heidegger tried so desperately to revise and

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 233.

reverse<sup>51</sup>—eventually fulfill their catastrophic destiny in a hyperreal mode of accumulative productivism, whereby everything must be/already has been represented to such radical extents that the image now completely drowns out the object (and the subject, as well): “Everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded.”<sup>52</sup>

By at least the time of the mechanical era and, unmistakably, by the time of contemporary digital epoch, the capitalist production of value reveals its roots in representation, and representation reveals its roots in reproduction: “the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra.”<sup>53</sup> As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, “Representation gives way to universal fungibility,”<sup>54</sup> the situation by which each sign becomes exchangeable and combinatory with the other. And for Baudrillard, as he claims in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, this is not only the case for ‘empirical reality’, the real of appearances and productivity, but also for our analytical/theoretical means of interpreting that reality (or what may remain of it, at least). He writes:

Theoretical production, like material production, loses its determinacy and begins to turn around itself, slipping *en abyme* towards a reality that cannot be found. This is where we are today: undecidability, the era of *floating theories*, as much as floating money. No matter what perspective they come from (the psychoanalytic included), no matter with what

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<sup>51</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155–182.

<sup>52</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer, CultureTexts Series (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), 34–35.

<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 12.

violence they struggle and claim to rediscover an immanence, or a movement without systems of reference (Deleuze, Lyotard, etc.), all contemporary theories are floating and have no meaning other than to serve as signs for one another. It is pointless to insist on their coherence with some 'reality' whatever that might be. The system has removed every secure reference from theory as it has from any other labour power.<sup>55</sup>

This lost determinacy is a violent testament to the raw power of the exchange and dissemination of images, signs, and signified meanings, and of the hyperreal's impressive and overwhelming capacity to form/deform/transform configurations of our collective real.

Baudrillard argues that production has become untethered at both ends. Having lost its "determinacy," the digital era falls witness to a mode of reproduction that has slipped "*en abyme* towards a reality that cannot be found." However, what Baudrillard fails to articulate in *Symbolic Exchange* but, to some extent, implies in several later texts is that this situation leaves production itself to become the only determinacy in the whole human universe. Production is in its simplest terms the singular, empty guarantee of 'something rather than nothing'. Thus, productivist metaphysics are reminiscent of Leibniz.<sup>56</sup> It is no wonder why Wiener once referred to Leibniz as "a patron saint for cybernetics out of the history of science."<sup>57</sup> Baudrillard also understood this, to some extent, when he claims the: "Cybernetic control, generation from model, differential modulation, feed-back, question/answer, etc.: such is the new *operational* configuration [...]. Digitality is its metaphysical principle (the God of Leibniz), and DNA its prophet."<sup>58</sup> The metaphysical

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<sup>55</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993), 44.

<sup>56</sup> See the discussion in chapter 1 regarding Leibniz's question, "why is there something rather than nothing?" See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason, 1714," in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker, vol. 2 (Dordrecht, Holland; Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 639.

<sup>57</sup> Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 12.

<sup>58</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 103.

principle determining that the world and its contents constitute some-thing out of no-thing governs our everyday lives; reality as such is determined by a single productivist principle without an intelligible structure or end. The content of all of reality is to be determined by its production and its production only. This content is by no means preconfigured, preset, or constituted a priori.

Reality unfolds and, eventually, it accumulates materially and representationally, but not according to a specific direction, programmatic development, or singular principle; it accumulates according to a fundamental *lack* of direction/program/principle altogether. In other words, reality is self-determined according to its own indeterminacy: *indifferent production is the only absolute imperative*. This is the central theoretical key to thinking about virulence as a mode of digital reproduction: virulence, in other words, is the tendency of real or virtual (but especially virtual) objects, technologies, media artifacts, ideologies, knowledges, texts, discourses, and other cultural contents, to *self-propagate* according to a fundamental lack of ends. The logic of the virus—a logic of the untethered and disembodied code in search of the living cell—is, therefore, a logic of pure reproduction or dispersion, and a logic of digital production. That is to say, virulence involves a logic of production without specific ends, or production as a singular and universal end to which all particular ends (i.e., the ends of subjective human interests) have become completely subservient. This, I postulate, is the key principle of productivism.

This productivist/virulent logic is an outgrowth of the strategic, mediatic and technical configurations of techno-fascist organization and social control in the age of mass reproduction (or, perhaps, vice versa). However, the logic of virulence also exceeds the fascist configuration of mass-mediatization laid out by Benjamin (examined above) in

one very crucial way. The productive logics of virulence continue to reify and reproduce the status quo of property relations by providing a relegation/pacification of social tensions via the strategic deployment of hyper-individuated freedom of/to information, and most importantly, also via an insidious imperative of public self-expression (which I have discussed throughout previous chapters). Yet, this no longer simply constitutes a hierarchical social organization of subjects in relation to the distribution of and access to property, technology, and the general world of objects: rather, today's post-fascist (or, perhaps, hyper-fascist) order strategically *dissolves subjects into property*.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore this dissolution and the relations of man-machine/subject-object in the contemporary digital context, hypothesizing that one outcome of untethered, virulent productivism is a totalizing cybernetic techno-social order, akin to Baudrillard's global "techno-structure."<sup>59</sup> Social control of the masses by technological means is by no means a new historical phenomenon. However, the degree to which such control is established, exerted, and reinforced/reproduced by non-subjective technological agencies—or, at least, our conceptual awareness of such a degree—is, I think, a quite novel situation worth exploring further. What we see today is, in effect, the formation and profusion of a global technological metasystem of computational networks, the hyper-rational functions of which instrumentally appropriate virtually every facet of human activity for greater productivity/operational efficiency. In order to theorize the possibility of such a cybernetic order more thoroughly, it may be useful to think about the predominant subject-object relations that have historically characterized various technological modes of production.

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<sup>59</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. François Debrix, *CTheory*, May 20, 2003, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>.

#### 4. Expanding Baudrillard's Gestural Orders: The Subject as an Operational Function of Technological Systems

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard considers the relative functional autonomy of various objective technological configurations. In this early work, he outlines several instances in which a plurality of inter-relational objects form rational operations within a common system, independent of the intentionality/will/agency of human subjects. Somewhat analogous to, yet significantly departing from, the context of French structuralism typified by thinkers like Saussure, Baudrillard's project (at least in *The System of Objects*) attempts to develop the theoretical and empirical contours of a relatively self-contained system of *signification* which is confined to the world of (technological) objects and rendered intelligible without needing intervention from external referents/reference. The system of objects described by Baudrillard, however, is no more *empirically* devoid of subjects than Saussure's system of language is devoid of objects.<sup>60</sup> The subject still very much exists in Baudrillard's early thinking about systems, although he seems to consider the techno-historical form of subjectivity to be diminished/diminishing. Nevertheless, subjects continue to play at least a minimal role in a given system's operability/functionality. Baudrillard's analysis decenters the role of the subject by analytically honing in on the object. Arguably, it also inverts the traditional subject-object relation by assigning agency to objects that are suddenly capable of appropriating/using subjects as mere means.<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard's techno-sociology renders a

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<sup>60</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1986).

<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard's early investigations of the tendencies of objective processes to hijack or appropriate the supposed free will of human subjects are arguably a generally ignored and underdeveloped precursor to many similar considerations in contemporary academic discourses of "new materialism." See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke

clear picture of modern culture, and it anticipates the future possibility (if not inevitability) of cybernetics, or the rule/governance of human subjects by machinic object-systems.

Before proceeding, I should note an apparent conceptual difficulty with turning back to early Baudrillard at the end of a dissertation that has been predominantly concerned, and mostly theoretically aligned, with his later work, which all but abandons his early thinking. While the subject maintains at least a minimal presence as a function of technologies in *The System of Objects*, it has altogether disappeared by the time of Baudrillard's writing on simulations. The operations of various technological object-systems no longer require the subject in order to function—machines entirely run themselves, to paraphrase (and radicalize) Schmitt.<sup>62</sup> I discuss this conflict/tension/contradiction between earlier and later Baudrillard in greater detail below, but at the outset, I should clarify that my intention here is not, strictly, to 'choose sides' (although one may easily infer from the focus of this dissertation that my theoretical bearings are more aligned with Baudrillard's later work), nor is it to reconcile/resolve this basic tension, generally speaking. Rather, my intention is to *extend* an important facet of Baudrillard's early theory (his notion of the gestural systems) retrospectively, and in light of his later insights, on which I have mostly focused thus far.

To begin, let us start with the role of the subject in Baudrillard's first work, *The System of Objects*. Here, Baudrillard accounts for the role of subjective agents in object-systems by theorizing a series of (indefinite, abstract and inexact) historical shifts in what

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University Press, 2010). See also Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 48.

he calls "gestural systems."<sup>63</sup> A gestural system refers to a particular mode in which a subject physically interacts with the objects of a functional technological structure. That he focuses on human gesture, however, does not mean that Baudrillard considers the capacity of human intentionality to be the central principle of an object-system's operability. On the contrary, Baudrillard seems to theorize the gestural shifts in subject-object relations as moving along a continuum by which human activity plays an increasingly minimal (or, at least, a more detached) role in technological operations.

The first gestural system to which Baudrillard refers is the "system of effort."<sup>64</sup> This system seems to operate as a corollary to, or perhaps a derivative of, predominantly mechanical technologies that are now largely antiquated, and which historically typify an industrial, but perhaps also pre-industrial/agricultural mode of production. This gestural system reflects those mechanical techniques of reproduction belonging to a Newtonian universe. It follows a general logic of causality, and is directed toward rendering maximum efficiency of effects. The system of effort primarily involves metabolic notions of labor, bodily exertion, and muscular movement. In this system, human labor is still considered to be the primary source/power/driver of production. It is still a primary motivator of action, or a prime mover in the world. In order to produce the (commodity) object, the machine (or organization of technological objects constituting a machinery)<sup>65</sup> amplifies the activities of

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<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 49.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>65</sup> See Gilbert Simondon's distinction between *soma* (ontology of a single technological object) and system (a cybernetic ensemble of many individual objects) in Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Ninian Mellamphy (London, Ontario: University of Western Ontario; Explorations Program of The Canada Council, 1980). *Soma*, as in "somatic," is derived from the Greek *σῶμα*, roughly meaning "body." But also, more broadly, it signifies a singular and self-contained basic unit of the animate/inanimate, worldly and material. See also Henry George Liddell et al., "σῶμα," in *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=sw%3Dma>.

human labor, or mechanically intensifies the subject's own organic metabolic effort. The object exists solely in order to amplify the bodily effort asserted by the subject's manual labor. This type of gestural system is characterized by a logic of extension. That is, the subject's effort *extends*, through/as/to the object via his or her mechanical augmentation, the otherwise limited organic capacity of corporeal movement. To some extent, this system of effort tends to mirror the physical dimensions of Marshall McLuhan's general notion that technological objects (media) are, in essence, "extensions of man," whereby the essential function of a technological object can be traced back to a basic origin in some corresponding human faculty.<sup>66</sup> Baudrillard's concept of the gestural system is not an ontological/epistemological means of tracking origins, however. Rather, it is an analytical category for examining functional relations in systemic technological contexts. Baudrillard might argue, contra McLuhan, that the 'extensions of man' thesis belongs to (and is, thus, limited by) the mechanical gestural system, and is therefore anachronistic to contemporary technological systems. In more contemporary informational systems, it is perhaps not that technological objects extend human activity, but rather that they have a general tendency of displacing it.<sup>67</sup> This becomes clearer, perhaps, in gestural systems more technically 'advanced' and complex than the ones which Baudrillard observed in the late 1960's for *The System of Objects*.

Baudrillard claims that there has occurred a general and historically recent shift in the ways by which subjects interact with technological objects. The system of effort has largely given way to what he calls a gestural system of *control*. The following table

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<sup>66</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>67</sup> Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 52.

outlines the characteristic differences in subject-object relations which are theoretically effected by the shift from a system of effort to a system of control. Moreover, in anticipation of my development below of an additional gestural system of 'cognition', the table also indicates characteristics of an additional shift that is not directly theorized by Baudrillard.

**TABLE 6.1.** Gesticular orientations of subject-object relation

Effort*		Control*		Cognition	
subjects externalize labor & (re)produce objects	maximal motility of gesticulation	subjects internalize & (re)produce object systems	minimal motility of gesticulation	object systems externalize & reproduce subjects	virtualized gesticulation
extension		mediation		mediatization	
direct	metabolic*	remote*	regulatory	self-referential	simulatory
alienatory	organic	spectacular	artificial	viral	operational

\*Note: The notions of a “gestural system of effort” and of a “gestural system of control” were first theorized by Jean Baudrillard in 1968 (See *The System of Objects*). This table expands the general logic he lays out. Any concept directly developed by Baudrillard is demarcated with an asterisk [\*]. Other categories are my own additions, elaborations, and expansions. (See also Tables 6.2 - 6.4).

If the gesticular orientation of effort was characterized by a focus on augmenting the human body as a metabolic whole, the orientation of control is characterized by a narrower focus on the eyes, feet, hands, and digits: “The domestic world, almost as much as the world of work, is governed by regular gestures of control [...] Buttons, levers, handles, pedals [...] have thus replaced pressure, percussion, impact or balance achieved by means of the body [...] only man's 'extremities' now have an active part to play in the

functional environment."<sup>68</sup> First published in 1968, Baudrillard's observation of this relational/functional shift from the force of the body to the minimal exertion of the hands and fingers announces the coming of the *digit(al)*.

What is perhaps most interesting about Baudrillard's understanding of this gestural shift is that it marks only a *tendency* in the reversal of technological relations between subjects and objects, which seems to intensify alongside the development of increasingly complex technological (and eventually digital) systems. Thus, for our purposes here, the key idea that *Baudrillard conceptualizes a kind of developmental trajectory of technology not according to some abstract notion of progress, but along the lines of increased human subjugation to objective technological operations*. This trajectory constitutes an inversion of Enlightenment logics of technological change, which tend to posit technological growth as innovative progress brought about by increased human agency and the empowerment of reason. Put differently, early Baudrillard does not yet postulate that the total disappearance of human subjectivity has taken place, or that subjects have been totally eclipsed by a global system of objects. He argues that the subject's *functional subjugation* to such a system has begun to take place just under our nose. At the time still very much in a mode akin to Horkheimer and Adorno's thinking on Enlightenment, Baudrillard writes:

[...] such a system cannot be self-sufficient: the total abstractness of remote action must be mitigated by what I refer to as a gestural system of control (by hand, eye, etc.). There is a sense in which this **minimal gestural system** is essential, for without it all this abstract power [of technological objects] would become meaningless. Man has to be reassured about his power by some sense of participation, albeit a merely formal one. So the gestural system of control must be deemed indispensable—not to make the system work *technically*, for more advanced technology could (and no doubt will) make it unnecessary, but, rather, to make that system work *psychologically*.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 51-52. [Emphasis added].

For Baudrillard, in *The System of Objects*, there is an obscure human remainder involved in the operations of objective technological systems: a residual role of subjectivity that cannot be entirely erased, lest the whole system becomes meaningless. The system of objects always requires at least a minimal degree of subjective involvement for the system to operate meaningfully. Thus, the gestural relational system and, by extension, the human-subject-function necessary for it to work are considered to be "indispensable" elements of a functional systemic whole. This is not to say that the human subject plays an *essential* role in technical/technological operations, but rather a *functionally necessary* role.

At first glance this implication seems to be a far cry from much of Baudrillard's later work, where he never admits to any degree of the functional necessity of subjects because he finds that subjects (and objects, for that matter) seem to have vanished with the real. As Baudrillard retrospectively acknowledged many years after writing *The System of Objects*: "There is no longer any system of objects. My first book contains a critique of the object as obvious fact, substance, reality, use value. There the object was taken as sign, but as sign still heavy with meaning."<sup>70</sup> The world of simulation and hyperreality that he would eventually theorize is a world of proliferating signs, devoid of certain reference or meaning. According to a hyperrealist logic, the subject-object has been superseded by a swarm of its signification. This seemingly perennial and 'natural' distinction has disappeared into a torrent of referentiality with no real referent. The subject and object equally have no actual weight; they find no loci in the real, and thus virulently proliferate in sign and image. Each constitutes only a simulacrum of itself, nothing more. Thus, unlike

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<sup>70</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 2002), 126.

the Baudrillard of *The System of Objects*, the Baudrillard of *Simulations* (and later works) would likely find a theoretical analysis of the subject-function to be all too tethered to an outmoded (over-moded/hyper-moded?) metaphysics of presence and substance.<sup>71</sup> To claim some existential (in)significance of the subject-function in an operational object system is, after all, still a claim about the reality of the subject, even if the subject remains only a hollowed presence of its former self, or an automaton of production.

In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard sometimes hints toward a future epistemic horizon (or lack thereof), which would fit more into a theory of simulacra than a theory of objects. He suggests that in the foreseeable future (if not already in the present), technologically advanced systems will be capable of complete functional self-sufficiency at the *technical* level. However, he claims, a gestural system of minimal subjective involvement is required for a system to work on the *psychological* level. Technological systems are, on the one hand, technically capable of completely eclipsing/annihilating the entirety of human life. On the other hand, because the energy/power of objects is abstract, without some degree of human concretization, the system of objects is virtually meaningless without the psychological dimension.

What we witness today in the digital is, perhaps, the paradoxical intersection between two abstract states/conditions. On the one hand, I posit that the virtual world of information and cybernetic domination is precisely such a world of objects exerting abstract technological power untethered/unchecked by subjects who have faded into its operations. This constitutes a kind of post-apocalyptic fallout despite, if not as a result of, the success of nuclear proliferation. On the other hand, as a result of this unchecked

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<sup>71</sup> Perhaps, against Leibniz's metaphysics of presence/production, Baudrillard would opt for a post-metaphysics (or hyper-metaphysics) of seduction. See Baudrillard, *Seduction*.

expression of abstract technological power, the current global situation is one whereby a system rendered meaningless now desperately and relentlessly calls upon subjects to signify, render meaning, and reify/re-anchor/reconstitute it: this, in short, is the technological imperative of communication today. But does the system require it to function? Do its operations depend on various forms of ideological/psychological reproduction? I do not think so.

**TABLE 6.2.** Gestural modalities as productivist genotypes of ideology, means of value creation, & orders of technological reproduction

Effort*		Control*		Cognition	
industrial production		industrial consumption		post-industrial “prosumption” & hyper-communication	
material	duplication	immaterial	repetition	informational	networked automation
socially disciplined & normalized by the techno-economic necessity of labor		behaviorally controlled & mediatically reproduced by the temporal techno-regime of work-leisure		cybernetically codified by the perpetual stimulation of networks and communication imperatives	
mechanical reproduction		spectacular reproduction		virulent reproduction	
economic profusion of commodity value		social profusion of sign value		simulacral disappearance-proliferation of value	

While the belief in one's subjective agency remains a pervasive and ideologically rampant social form, so to speak, I would argue that one's ability to effect objective change in the technological world is no longer relevant to the operations and colonizations deployed by digital technological systems, as the later Baudrillard clearly intimated. He theorizes that “any cell, any organ whatever, becomes viral as soon as it is no longer subject to the sovereign legislation of the whole body. Hence a new pathology beyond the organic, even beyond the psychosomatic, which is still linked to the individualization of the

'soul' and the body."<sup>72</sup> If today's pathology belongs to the order of the virus, then, why do we everywhere find effective reproduction of the hyper-individualized subject-soul and corporeal body? Perhaps the impotence and irrelevance of the human subject within advanced technological systems is precisely why we everywhere encounter the reproduction of subjectivity as universal, yet also empty and superfluous 'functions' within those systems. The irrelevance of man in today's technological operations inadvertently instills within him the imperative of his own functionality and, moreover, the impetus for his own reproduction *as subject*. This hypothesis suggests that the subject function emerges not in a causal relation as a response to the operational needs of object systems, but just the opposite: as an absurdity produced of/as its own uselessness and its own excess. The 'Matrix' has absolutely no need to enslave human organisms; it just happens to be configured to do so. It is not somehow fueled/fed by human activity. The subject, here, is a matter of excess—one of many possible expressions of a system's hyper-accumulation. This is why ideology and the subject today are reproduced according a logic of virulence—an open-ended logic of endless propagation, whereby the subject virus fulfills its destiny only as an expression of its own nullity. Virulence is not only a matter of the component's detachment from its sovereign organism, but also the function's detachment from its role in the system. The subject of the digital age is hyper-reproduced by and in technological systems not strictly according to the functional demands of that system, but as byproduct of its operations. The subject is today but a virtual sign-secretion of systems: a fossil, and a metabolic remainder which is not so much continually reproduced as it is continually flushed out of a system and recycled.

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<sup>72</sup> Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V*, 18.

In the digital age, it is not the *content* of ideology that propels technological systems, but the *form*. The medium of ideology is itself the only relevant and discernable message. It is not a particular kind of ideological structure—namely, capitalist or (neo)liberal ideology—which is solely responsible for maintaining productive technological systems. Rather, it is the virulent imperative of ideology itself that takes on this role. We no longer even need to believe in the reality of our experience as subjects in order for the digital to thrive, or for the subject to seem to remain real/corporeal/material in the digital. This belief in reality is reproduced through its ideological underpinnings as an expression of excess, perhaps through a self-referential festival of productivist accumulation.<sup>73</sup> The semi-automated production/reproduction of radically varied ideological contents across representational/informational circuits of global communication is not simply a condition of the system's overall productivist functionality, but also an *expression* of it. Put differently, this semi-automated production is, perhaps, an expression of the metastasization and metastabilization of a global totalizing dominance by the "techno-structure."<sup>74</sup>

Disbelief is today just as effectual as belief. Indifference is just as effectual as agency. Likewise, critical negation—a subject's intervention in/mediation of reality—is consequentially just as socially complacent and submissive as blind acceptance. Even the greatest of social and political refusals and oppositions can still be codified, marked a "0" in an endless stream of 0-1 binary computation. The production of communist discourses, or of communist ideologies (if such things even still exist) are no exceptions to the

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<sup>73</sup> Is this perhaps some hidden element or meaning beneath Bataille's general economy—the reproduction and sacrificial expenditure of the subject as *accursed share*? See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Vol. 1: Consumption* (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

<sup>74</sup> Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global."

overarching system. Leftist ideals, such as those expressed by the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, too shall be rendered informational/representational content, channeled accordingly, algorithmically appropriated by a system of feedback loops, and transformed into some form of further production (whether it takes the shape of government surveillance, niche manufacturing, tracked advertising, Web 2.0 journalism, etc.). Even one's political and social indifference will be coded as an expression in and of the system, or at best a datum for the social scientific measure of apathy. One cannot even commit suicide without entering the drab bureaucratic afterlife of some record, figure, or statistic, so not even death retains its sovereignty. For the parasitic virus, biological death is simply yet another impetus to propagate itself across living hosts. There can be no sovereignty outside of its mere sign insofar as the potential fate of every self-immolation committed as protest is to be captured in the photo, circulated as image, represented by text, mediated by cyclical news commentary, repetitiously signified in speech, reproduced/redistributed in endless aporetic discourse, until the originary meaning of the sacrifice has been utterly lost in its own saturation, rendered as yet another element of the productivist cybernetic order, and designed to provoke exponentially more communicative activity. This abject horror of eternal circulation was once the cultural and theological imaginary of hell, but is now what we casually refer to as "viral media." The abysmal has been successfully outmoded by the viral.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> And what about the abyss over which language hovers, as discussed in chapter four? Perhaps it too has been rendered obsolete. This is to suggest that the originary void from which language first erupts has been totally and irreconcilably buried by that very eruption. Thus, the crucial question becomes: to what extent are theoretical questions relating to voids/abysses/nothingness still worthy of consideration? In Baudrillard's terms, the question is as follows: to what extent is the third order of simulation completely outmoded by the fourth order? We must also ask, however, to what extent is it even possible to theorize the latter without first theorizing the former? When we think of one, are we not always already thinking of the other? After all, the virulent fourth order, which I have extended and

## 5. Effort, Control, Cognition: Re/mediated Subjectivity and Gestural Systems in the Age of Digital Reproduction

What does/could/would a gestural system characteristic of advanced cybernetically hyper-functional *informational systems* look like? If the system of gestural control rendered and/or reflected a pre-existing mode of 'lazy' corporeality, docile bodies,<sup>76</sup> and subsequently minimal subjective interference/activity in objective operations, would the gestural system proper to our current informational epoch come to engender an even further exaggerated mode of subjectivity characterized, perhaps, by radically sedentary bodies? Or, even, completely virtualized bodies—'pure' minds in information? Moreover, would it reflect some form of radical anthropomorphic indifference/passivity/absence, non-subjectivity, or even a post-subjective ontology?<sup>77</sup> What room would there be for the gestures of human beings in such a world, where a matrix of complex machines runs completely untethered to subjectivity in a ceaseless accumulation of content, absurdly 'communicating' and circulating data between the self-referential nodes of a shared universal network? Better yet, what, if any, kind of system of gesture could be theorized to explain this world? What room would there be for the

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problematized throughout this dissertation, characterizes a world of global digitality, within which nothing ever becomes altogether obsolete or goes entirely extinct. Anachronistic phenomena are continually resurrected/recycled/reproduced through the production of the new. I see no reason why theorization of the void should constitute an exception to this principle.

<sup>76</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 135-169.

<sup>77</sup> Examples of such ontologies are developed in several post-humanist literatures, which this dissertation has admittedly left underexplored. See, for example, Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181. See also Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Lastly, see Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

gestural in such a world which is completely untethered from subjectivity, yet is everywhere found to suggest precisely the opposite: that the matrix is about/for subjects? What are we to make of such a cybernetic system, in other words, that simultaneously means subjectivity's obsolescence and its ceaseless appeal/production/signification on/through networks like Facebook?

A basic hypothesis: the human serves, however minimally, as an ontic function of the machine. This is not to say, however, that a minimal role or degree of presence of the human subject is necessary for digital technological operations—only that such operations tend to reproduce, perhaps even inadvertently, subject-functions.

With this hypothesis in mind, the analytical description of a technological world composed entirely of objects, from which subjects have altogether vanished, holds a great deal of truth, but may be somewhat insufficient. To claim that the subject has disappeared only reconciles one side of a necessarily twofold equation. As later Baudrillard teaches us (and as I have outlined in earlier chapters), the subject also proliferates in/as the mass production of its signs. What seems more sufficient and relevant to the task at hand is the analysis of a world wherein subjects are found to have somehow disappeared *as subjects* (that is, as subjects in the traditional sense shared by most of western epistemology), yet also found proliferating exponentially in the form of *subject-functions*, governed by cybernetics, and (unconsciously) existing only by virtue of their service to a metastasized system of productivist object operations.

As I have suggested, Baudrillard's theoretical models for the gestural systems of effort and control respectively form an analytical framework used to identify and theorize several ways in which these subject-functions are continually reproduced and remediated

in/as an *optimally minimal* component necessary for the ontological guarantee of cybernetic operations. I propose, on the other hand, a gestural system which critically expands Baudrillard's early logics of gesture in order to account for many of his later understandings regarding simulation/hyperreality, and thus, also, to begin to theorize the cybernetic operations by which the virulent proliferation of subject-functions takes place, *despite it being completely unnecessary for the operations of a system*. The subject, perhaps, is reproduced/remediated as the uncontrolled/accumulating excess of cybernetic feedback systems.<sup>78</sup>

Following Baudrillard's understanding of the systems of effort and control, I refer here to a system of *cognition*, or a cognitive gestural system. I argue that, if the gestural system of effort characteristically reflected the era of mechanical technology, and the system of control reflected an era of analog media communication, then a gestural system of cognition reflects a *digital* modality of labor (insofar as labor remains the appropriate term) in cognitive/communicative capitalism. This suggests that the kind of gestural activity/subjective functionality with which Baudrillard was concerned in *System of Objects* has largely become virtualized by informational systems, 'internalized', and psychologized in continually digitally reproduced/remediated subjectivities. No doubt, virtualization is something which Baudrillard later theorized as his thinking continued to develop.<sup>79</sup> Particularly, his interests eventually turned to the implication that the

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<sup>78</sup> Regarding the mechanics of feedback loops relevant to excess and overproduction, see the discussion in chapter 1. See also the following discussions and explications of cybernetic feedback: (1) Lawrence S. Bale, "Gregory Bateson, Cybernetics, and the Social/Behavioral Sciences," *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 3, no. 1 (1995). (2) Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 48-73. (3) Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 96. (4) Lars Skyttner, *General Systems Theory: Problems, Perspectives, Practice*, 2nd ed. (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2005), 102.

<sup>79</sup> Particularly, see the entirety of Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

virtualization of reality necessarily leads to the real and the real and the virtual becoming indistinguishable. In one of his latest aphoristic writings, he comments:

The lack of distinction between the real and the virtual is the obsession of our age. Everything in our current affairs attests to this, not to mention the big cinematic productions: *The Truman Show*, *Total Recall*, *Existenz*, *Matrix*, etc. [...] The encoding/decoding of *our* reality is done by technology. Only what is produced by this technical effect acquires visible reality. And it [...], therefore, puts an end to this subtle lack of distinction between the real and the virtual [...]. Through special effects, everything acquires an operational self-evidence, a spectacular reality that is, properly speaking, the reign of simulation.<sup>80</sup>

A primary effect in the wake of a wide deployment of virtualization processes is that the distinctions between several categories such as gesture/ideology, subject/object, material/immaterial, and virtual/real have become incredibly blurred (as the Baudrillard of simulation told us). Thus, understanding the generalized function(s) or operational role(s) of the subject is even more difficult, and might require a considerably wider and more complex working definition of gesture, which expands its referential domain to include matters of subject-object techno-relations that do not manifest in physically observable appearances, and moreover, that are neither always clearly materially referential nor empirically verifiable. We must cease to look toward the subject-function (and all the potential for gestural relations which it entails) as points of operational necessity, but rather as points of operational *effects*. One may interpret this threefold series of systemic shifts in gesture orientations as belonging to a trajectory of the “post-human,” that is to say, in terms of a *quantitative and qualitative movement away from human agency as a locus of determination in technological affairs*. This technological trajectory seems to trace a gradual—albeit *ideal*, and thus also limited—technological movement away from the human subject as an ‘in-itself’ actor and agent of onto-technological activity and

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<sup>80</sup> Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V*, 92.

change. The subject remains a functor of technological processes and development, to some extent. But gradually, the closer to a system of cognition we get, the less emphasis there is in object systems and the less central to their operations the subject becomes. The subject-function within a system is less an agent/actor than a hyperreal expression of the system itself. Since at least the industrial revolution, it seems that the *physical* role of human beings in technological material reproduction has significantly diminished.

Somewhere in the fog of exponential technological change and the advancements of hyper-efficient, rationally organized, semi-autonomous technological systems, one finds, as Baudrillard put it, "that Man has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him, so to speak, organizing his surroundings and thus appropriating his actions."<sup>81</sup> The denser human epistemologies in the broad fields of science, technology, and engineering become, the more buried are humans underneath the operations of their produced objects. Yet they are also exhumed from the rubble, and exalted by these same operations! Metabolic human activity is all but encompassed/encapsulated by advanced applications of human creativity, and eventually, also, of objective creativity. Baudrillard argues:

Technology is not content merely to encapsulate earlier gestures, it also invents new operations, and above all splits up the operational field into completely different functions or sets of functions. Man's abstract relationship to his (technical) objects [...] is [...] less a matter of his gestures having been *replaced* than of the abstractness of the very way in which functions of been *split up*, and the impossibility of any analogical apprehension of this splitting-up by reference to earlier gestures.<sup>82</sup>

By 'splitting up', Baudrillard refers to the ways in which many historically emergent technological apparatuses tend to fragment and compartmentalize older technological

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<sup>81</sup> Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

forms and, in the process, produce new gestural relationships. In a footnote, Baudrillard gives the example of the 'original', symbolically complex, character of fire, which provided three basic functions: namely, "heating, cooking, and lighting." By the time of modernity, he seems to suggest, fire had undergone a technological splitting: these primary functions were relegated into separate technological objects, such as the kitchen stove, the lightbulb lamp, etc. "This new environment, based on a completely different division of functions," he claims, "has no symbolic dimension whatsoever."<sup>83</sup> It constitutes a technological ecosystem, in other words, that belongs to an order of rational operations and mutually constitutive functions of objects which is, for all intents and purposes, devoid of symbols and other subject-dependent modalities of interpretation (and perhaps of interpretation as such). The modern instrumental appropriation of fire, in particular, ended the significations of whatever qualities of magic or mysticism once characterized its nature (or, perhaps more accurately, *failed to characterize it* and thus preserved its magic).<sup>84</sup> The symbolic depth of fire—stemming, perhaps, from its ambiguous form and multiplicity of function—is extinguished, so to speak, by its rational/technological organization in various everyday technologies and consumer object-devices. Yet, what Baudrillard misses here, perhaps, is the point that, simultaneously, fire has also been hyper-extended and hyper-symbolized. Regardless, a major facet of his point seems to be that human relationships with fire—the general form and function of human gestures in relation to it, as a technology—are irreversibly altered. Such is the course of all technological 'advancement': to fragment the object, or split it into various functions according to relations of human gesture. The

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> See above discussion toward the end of chapter 5. See also Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

following conceptual table outlines the unique modes of splitting which take place respective of the gestural orientation.

**TABLE 6.3.** “Gestural systems”\* & respective communicational/operational orientations

Effort*		Control*		Cognition	
<i>Corporeal</i>		<i>Ethereal</i>		<i>Hyperreal</i>	
inter-subjective	communicative (sign)	inter-objective	operational (signal)	trans-nodal	circuitual (feedback loop)
<i>Soma</i>  (singular organic body/object/unit; discernable ontology between technological objects and user-subjects)		<i>System</i>  (plurality of <i>soma</i> ; formations of organic and/or artificial groupings of functionally complimentary units)		<i>Cybernetic envelopment (or ‘swarming’)</i>  (radical plurality; everything subsumed by its representation; engulfed by simulation of a reality which no longer exists)	
exterior consolidation of functions		exterior fragmentation of functions		interior fragmentation of operations	
[finite <b>assembly</b> of objects]		[finite “ <b>splitting</b> ” of objects]*		[infinite “ <b>splitting</b> ” of virtual]	

It may seem counterintuitive to conceptualize any given development in digital technology as belonging to this general trend of splitting the gestural. On the one hand, the emergence of the contemporary personal computer, for instance, seems to achieve precisely the opposite effect of splitting/fragmenting. That is to say, digital technology operates not only by dividing and compartmentalizing a multitude of tasks and functions, but also by means of (re)consolidating them into the networked virtual social environments of individual technological devices (such as a personal computer or smart phone). But on the other hand, digital/informational operations split up and relegate technological functions, in a sense, and normalize particular kinds of gestures, namely, cognitive gestures occurring behind digital interfaces, between subjects and virtual objects (which may or may not correspond to material objects in the ‘real’, non-virtual

world). This is not to say that these virtual objects do not have a material component, however. The materiality of information, data storage facilities, data transfer facilities, hardware, firmware, and software is clear enough. I only mean to claim that virtual objects have been (re)produced perceptually as immaterial, which is to say, as I alluded earlier, that they have been reproduced on the level of ideology.

Although particular types of gestures utilized within various technological relations may often be ideologically motivated or reproduced, particularly in terms of their social repetition and normalization, (contra Althusser) one does not need a framework of ideology to understand the processes by which such relations take shape to begin with. As new objects emerge within a technological system, they tend to split/reconfigure/repurpose/displace other (now antiquated) technological objects and functions. Over time, and with repetition and regularity, a system's operations will tend to become functionally normalized and socially concretized as a subject-object *interface*. By the term interface, I refer to some sort of bridge through which a subject-actor can gain some degree of access to or control of the objective operations within a given system. An interface may appear to be as (deceptively) simple as the dial on a home thermostat, or as complex as the CPU voltage and multiplier controls in the BIOS settings of a PC's motherboard. Examples range from the input settings on a plasma television, to Facebook's mobile messaging application, to a NASA launch terminal in the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Gestures are the physical manner in which humans interact with technological systems via its interface.

The central point worth noting here is simple enough: as technological/technical systems or configurations of objects increase operational and architectural complexity,

their corresponding interfaces and gestural designs generally *do not* reflect a proportional increase in complexity. At least at the level of everyday consumer technologies, the human interface is most likely to remain stable or simplified, but rarely will it become more complex. In the case of recent trends in mobile computation, for example, one is likely to find an inverse relation between the simplicity of a system's interface on the one hand, and the complexity of its operations on the other. An interface's development in a contemporary consumer operating system such as Apple's iOS is arguably motivated by design imperatives which value simplicity and usability. Yet, simultaneously, the development of an interface's corresponding generational hardware improvements (insofar as they are consistent with Moore's law<sup>85</sup>) are driven by imperatives relating to speed, efficiency, ability to perform ever more intensive computational functions, increased capacity to navigate increasingly complex/congested informational networks, etc.

This relation between the complexity of a system and the simplicity of its interface is important because it suggests that a simple interface's modality of human gesture—such as the click of a mouse or swipe a screen—diminishes in terms of potency/agency/efficacy relative to advanced, complex technological systems. From

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<sup>85</sup> Moore's Law, according to *The Internet Encyclopedia*, is "An observation named for Intel cofounder Gordon Moore that the number of transistors per square inch of an integrated circuit has doubled every year since integrated circuits were invented. This 'law' has also variously been applied to processor speed, memory size, etc." Most broadly and colloquially, I employ the term in order to refer to the exponential rate at which computational efficiency and systemic complexity develops over time. See Hossein Bidgoli, ed., *The Internet Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 12. Recently, Moore's law has been commonly announced as dead. And, given the public relations backlash from Intel, there is probably good reason to think of Moore's Law less as a law, and more as a marketing ploy. See Alyssa Newcomb, "Intel CEO Says Reports of the Death of Moore's Law Have Been Greatly Exaggerated," *ABC News*, April 27, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/intel-ceo-reports-death-moores-law-greatly-exaggerated/story?id=38703042>.

another perspective, one might argue, that the exact opposite exchange of power takes place: a complex system of objects is rendered all the more impotent when subjected to a human will which can be exercised/empowered/inflicted by means of increasingly simple gestures on increasingly accessible interfaces. This perspectival contradiction is never entirely reconciled by logic, but always in a situation-dependent flux, so to speak. While this flux has perhaps always worked beneath subject-object relations, the intensity through which it appears to operate in digital culture is perhaps unique to our contemporary techno-social configuration. The heightened, irreconcilable tension between the subject and object engenders a new kind of technological dynamism, which serves to continually fragment, confuse, and render the subject-object relationship altogether unintelligible. Moreover, a positive understanding of the causal relation—which term is primary and which is secondary—is now impossible.<sup>86</sup> Because the subject and object intensify and reproduce one another by means their mutual negation, the ontological truth of either becomes a matter of radical uncertainty and unattainability. In effect, they mutually annihilate the possibility of each other.

The concomitant disappearance and proliferation of both the subject and object takes place, in part, as a function of the gestural relation to technological systems via their respective interfaces, which is outlined above. With advancements in the complexity, efficiency, and scope of technological systems, the gestural is, in a sense, a central component of technologically 'splitting'. Put differently, the human gesture interfaces with a system at each new phase of its splitting of functions. The gestural system is, at any

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<sup>86</sup> Although, of course, the subject is generally the elevated and privileged term of this relation according to our everyday 'commonsensical' epistemology (and the deep-seated anthropocentrism in which it seems to be more or less permanently imbedded).

given point of its complexification, understood here as the dominant mode, or the most widely normalized type or 'species', of interaction between an immanent subject and an encapsulating system of objects.

**TABLE 6.4.** Principle logics of technological operations and gestural relations

Effort*	Control*	Cognition
Less mediated, slow, mostly local transmission of meaning --- via a complex of organic subjects and mechanical technological objects	Electronically mediated, instantaneous, distant transmission of meaning --- via a complex of representational subjects and analog technological objects	Informationally mediated, hyper-instantaneous, global transmission of data --- via a vast and sophisticated circuitry of virtual and material ambiguous subject-object nodes
Techno-politics of <i>distance</i> --- [problematics of alienation, labor, nature]		Techno-politics/post-politics of <i>proximity</i> --- [problematics of virulence & communication]
alienated subjects → mechanical objects	electronic objects → mediated subjects	virtual nodes → virtual nodes ←
Material accumulation & over-production		
traditional exploitative manufacture of object-commodities	informational techniques of social control and domination; over-production of representational media: enter the <i>culture industry</i>	hyper-signification; implosivity and absolute saturation: enter the <i>Überbenannt</i>
<u>Homological</u>	<u>Analogical</u>	<u>Cybernetic/informational</u>

The gestural system of control involved a kind of finite limitation to processes of splitting. The fragmentation of an object into a multiplicity of functions was limited to exactly that: the domain of objects. The system of cognition exponentially intensifies the logics of splitting (and thus of the productive processes themselves) by means of a strategy of virtualization. In other words, it involves a mode of virtualized gesture (or cognition) which, by virtue of being abstract and intangible, virtualizes objects such that

their splitting is no longer limited by the historical unfolding of the slow, objective-real, but now capable of the instantaneous, virtual-hyperreal. Once a system and the objects which it comprises have become a matter of information—once they have been virtualized—the splitting of their functions takes place with exponential efficiency and hyper-industrial automation which, arguably, spirals out of control in a globally encompassing orgy of productivist activity. Production that has been operationally compressed as information and reduced to mostly virtual means is capable of forming almost unimaginably complex structures and intangible networks of operation. This virtualization of the object and the cognitive gestural subject—a kind of revolution in its own right—constitutes a degree of operational virulence heretofore objectively impossible, and hereafter, virtually inevitable: the violent and virulent emergence of digital production.

## **6. The Cybernetic Trajectory of Implosion**

The whole relational edifice—that utterly vapid concept we call ‘the social’<sup>87</sup>—is now reduced to the simple matter of communicational feedback, regardless of the particular message or content: a matter of how one node on a network responds to another, responds to another, and responds to another, ad nauseam. This is a feedback loop designed on the basis of instrumental adaptation of hyper-efficient reflexes—the feedback of the algorithmically managed digital masses, which constitutes an emergent and globalizing cybernetic whole.<sup>88</sup> This is not the emergence of universal power in the shape of a new world order, but the metastasis left behind by the impossibility of precisely such

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<sup>87</sup> Regarding the disappearance/implosion of the social, see Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 18-20.

<sup>88</sup> The issue of negative feedback in automated, self-reproducing/self-sustaining cybernetic systems was first considered in Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 95-116. See also my discussion in chapter 1

universal authority: the terminal cancer left behind by the death of God, and in the shadow of an impossible *nomos*.<sup>89</sup>

Each time we express/represent ourselves online, we also express or represent in futility, and inadvertently express and perform the very circuitry of the systems which dominate us. One seeks refuge in the pessimistic optimism which secretly hopes that there is no longer anything, or anyone left to dominate. This is all the more reason, perhaps, for a system to artificially reproduce itself as if the dominated subject and the stakes of its emancipation retained any gravity. That is to say, as if the whole system—and any singular articulation witnessed within its reproductive operations—could somehow amount to something other than a reflection of itself. Well before the contemporary reign of digital networks and obsessive connectivity, Baudrillard intimates the self-referential character of cybernetics in terms of the word-processor:

What people are contemplating on their word-processor screens is the operation of their own brains. It is not entrails that we try to interpret these days, nor even hearts or facial expressions; it is, quite simply, the brain. We want to expose to view its billions of connections and watch it operating like a video-game. All this cerebral, electronic snobbery is hugely affected – far from being the sign of a superior knowledge of humanity, it is merely the mark of a simplified theory, since the human being is here reduced to the terminal excrescence of his or her spinal cord. But we should not worry too much about this: it is all much less scientific, less functional than is ordinarily thought. All that fascinates us is the *spectacle* of the brain and its workings. What we are wanting here is to see our thoughts unfolding before us—and this itself is a superstition.<sup>90</sup>

Cybernetics is digital ontology without the possibility of an outside; it is an infinite series of 0-1 firings, pulses, and signals which signal nothing other than the system itself. All

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<sup>89</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (Telos Press Publishing, 2006). Regarding an expansion upon Schmitt's work on the *nomos*, which updates/accounts for the digital, see also François Debrix, "The Virtual *Nomos*?" in *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos*, ed. Stephen Legg (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 220–226.

<sup>90</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America*, New Edition (Verso, 2010), 36.

that's left is self-reference, or the mirage of 'communication' hallucinated somewhere between points of micro-circuits (between what remains of subject and its machine) and macro-circuits. This neutral and radically heterogeneous activity culminates in the automated codification placed to the service of an indecipherable homogeneity of global domination.<sup>91</sup> Here, there is no single dominator or repressor, no exercising of absolute authority, and no single class locus of power and strategic oppression.<sup>92</sup> In fact, there is no subject or object at all! *Only code.*

The gestural system of cognition is more or less synonymous with the end or impossibility of gestural systems. It marks a gestural dis/order whereby the most prominent modality of human gesture is no longer a means to productivist technological operations, but rather an effect amongst a chaotic and interminable/indeterminable constellation of other technological effects, which proliferate and accumulate, such that they bury all possibility of uncovering roots or causes. In other words, these operations constitute a manifold of effects without cause, or symptoms without determinable disease. As Baudrillard writes: "causes are merely a diversion, effects have not the slightest interest in them."<sup>93</sup>

*The subject is a byproduct of the global operations of informational networks: the cybernetic excrement of a self-referential/self-propagating metastasization. The subject is*

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<sup>91</sup> See Baudrillard's concept of the global "techno-structure" in Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global." See also his later thinking on the "total screen" in Jean Baudrillard and Philippe Petit, *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 1998). See also William Merrin, "'Total Screen': 9/11 and *The Gulf War: Reloaded*," in *Baudrillard and the Media: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 98–114.

<sup>92</sup> Ideology, it seems, becomes all the more powerful and virulent a force once it no longer has a center, once it has been virtualized. A similar point is made in François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 213–214.

<sup>93</sup> Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V*, 59.

*fundamentally a matter of operational excess, the result of an overextended cybernetic system, of a culture entirely distended in/as implosion.*

But what if the implosion is not yet complete? And what if subjectivity, as this excess or excrement, were somehow capable of assuming the form and function of a pollutant? Is there a possibility for a new destructive politics to take shape around the aim of overloading this global digital ecology with its own garbage? Perhaps such a virulent force would extend Baudrillard's "new revolutionary slogan," to "MAKE BEAUBOURG BUCKLE" (which is anything but revolutionary), as an imperative to be unleashed on the entire world of production and the whole globalizing/totalizing system?<sup>94</sup> "No need to torch it or to fight it; just go there! That's the best way to destroy it," Baudrillard writes. Speed up this slow-motion implosion by helping to oversaturate/overload its circuits. "The fragility of this edifice already exudes catastrophe, and they stampede it just to make it buckle."<sup>95</sup> Is a politics of achieving "*critical mass*," or "*implosive mass*" of this sort—of overloading the system with itself, in effect—even possible?<sup>96</sup> The better question, perhaps, is: are digitized/virtualized user-subjects not already urged, more or less, by cybernetic operations to 'make it buckle' anyway? I doubt there is much room for politics here. Yet, I cannot help but desire some type of political theorization despite this: that is to say, I am curious about the political (or post-political?) possibilities involved, as Baudrillard put it, in "Being secondarily pessimistic—believing that the good always ends up going bad. And secondarily optimistic—*believing that the system is best placed to put an end to itself.*"<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence," trans. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, *October* 20 (1982): 9.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>97</sup> Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V*, 68. [Emphasis added].

Perhaps implosion cannot take the form of a politics because it forever remains abstract, and thus an ambiguous point of saturation above which we remain suspended, never entirely certain whether the point of saturation remains on the horizon, yet to become complete. Or, alternatively, implosion is something which has always already passed: some non-localizable locus of a past, which defies all articulation and representation, yet renders those very things possible, as if the human Genesis was itself a violent act of originary implosion.



## Coda The Curious Case of Morgellons

The only solution to the mechanization of man is *le devenir-machine*: becoming-machine. [...]: total automatism, all trace of the human gone. The dream of the virtual era, by contrast, is to wrest the machine from machinicity, to make it intelligent and soulful, 'interactive', to turn it into an associate 'anthropoid' with the same affective and intellectual, sexual and reproductive functions—and, lastly, the same viruses and melancholia.

-Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

There is perhaps no better exemplar of the bizarre virulence of cybernetic digital culture than the virtually emergent condition of "Morgellons disease," sometimes also referred to as "Morgellons syndrome." In the final pages of this dissertation, it is worth excavating in some detail the digital media archives of Morgellons, as well as its medical history and the unprecedented techno-scientific forms by which its contagion spread and became discursively intelligible.

Sufferers of Morgellons claim they are plagued by a dermatological infestation of lesions, which they commonly say are caused by microscopic white fibers, or thread-like parasitic creatures.<sup>2</sup> The emergent condition first received its name in 2002 from Mary Leitao, a mother who believed her son was suffering from it. It was reported that she coined the term "from an obscure, 17<sup>th</sup> century French medical article describing an illness, called the Morgellons, in which black hairs emerge from the skin."<sup>3</sup> Soon thereafter, a

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories V: 2000-2004*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 69.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Marris, "Mysterious 'Morgellons Disease' Prompts US Investigation," *Nature Medicine* 12, no. 9 (September 2006): 982.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Devita-Raeburn, "The Morgellons Mystery," *Psychology Today*, March 1, 2007, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200702/the-morgellons-mystery>.

growing community of Internet users began gathering virtually on Internet forums and message boards, diagnosing themselves and each other, and posting photos of skin lesions and mysterious images of collected fibers placed under a microscope. Conspiracy theories surrounding the nature of the condition—ranging from ideas about alien invasions to government cover-ups—have also circulated through these forums.<sup>4</sup> Media reports indicate that in 2004, Leitao started a nonprofit website which she called the “Morgellons Research Foundation.”<sup>5</sup> However, the earliest archival record available for the nonprofit’s web address indicates a site titled “The Morgellons Foundation” as early as 2002.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, a group of self-diagnosed Morgellons patients started yet another foundation website, the “Charles E. Holman Morgellons Disease Foundation.”<sup>7</sup> By 2015, there were over twenty-thousand people self-identified and self-diagnosed with Morgellons.<sup>8</sup> This might constitute a medical epidemic or a mass contagion, if not for one major problem: most medical researchers agree that Morgellons does not exist (at least, not as a dermatological somatic illness).

Following pressures from an Internet campaign, which, largely perpetuated by the Morgellons Research Foundation, managed to send thousands of letters to members of

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, “Morgellons Disease Support Forum,” Web Social Forum, *CureZone*, (2015), <http://www.curezone.org/forums/f.asp?f=693>.

<sup>5</sup> Chico Harlan, “Mom Fights for Answers on What’s Wrong with Her Son,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 23, 2006, sec. Local, <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/2006/07/23/Mom-fights-for-answers-on-what-s-wrong-with-her-son/stories/200607230221>.

<sup>6</sup> “Retrieved Web Archive Image of [www.morgellons.org](http://www.morgellons.org): The Morgellons Foundation,” [www.morgellons.org](http://www.morgellons.org), June 7, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20020607101421/http://www.morgellons.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> “The Charles E. Holman Morgellons Disease Foundation Homepage,” *The Charles E. Holman Morgellons Disease Foundation*, 2015, <http://www.thecehf.org/>. See also, Katherine Foley, “Diagnosis or Delusion?,” *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/01/diagnosis-or-delusion/384206/>.

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

congress, and gained the support of such notable figures as then-senators Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) was afforded a one-million-dollar budget to research the disease.<sup>9</sup> In 2012 the findings were published. The research group referred to an “unexplained dermatopathy,” and determined that “no common underlying medical condition or infectious source was identified, similar to more commonly recognized conditions such as delusional infestation.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the study’s conclusions were more or less in agreement with the medical consensus which considers most cases of Morgellons to be instances in which the patients are suffering from an old and well-documented psychosomatic condition referred to as “delusions of parasitosis,” or the paranoid fixation of belief in some kind of dermatological parasitic infestation, which causes the patient to perceive itching sensations on their body, and to scratch at them, causing legions.<sup>11</sup> The great Morgellons mystery was considered by most to be defunct, and considered by many to have been exposed as an Internet farce. Less than a month after the CDC results were published, the Morgellons Research Foundation shut down its operations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brigid Schulte, “Figments of the Imagination?,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, January 20, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/16/AR2008011603134.html?sid=ST2008011801924>.

<sup>10</sup> Michele L. Pearson et al., “Clinical, Epidemiologic, Histopathologic and Molecular Features of an Unexplained Dermatopathy,” ed. Christophe Egles, *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 1 (January 25, 2012), 1.

<sup>11</sup> See Roland W. Freudenmann and Peter Lepping, “Delusional Infestation,” *Clinical Microbiology Reviews* 22, no. 4 (October 2009): 690–732. See also Jeffrey Dunn, Michael B. Murphy, and Katherine M. Fox, “Diffuse Pruritic Lesions in a 37-Year-Old Man After Sleeping in an Abandoned Building,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 164, no. 8 (August 2007): 1166–1172.

<sup>12</sup> An archived image of the site retrieved from early February 2012 shows the site active, but one retrieved from mid-February, 2012 indicates that the MRF “is no longer an active organization and is not accepting registrations or donations.” See “Retrieved Web Archive Image of [www.morgellons.org](http://www.morgellons.org): MRF Shutdown Notification,” *morgellons.org*, February 15, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120215135010/http://www.morgellons.org/>.

The medical consensus that Morgellons does not constitute a new pathogenic or parasitic outbreak/epidemic risks obscuring the ways in which it constitutes a different kind of contagion, every bit as 'real'. The emergence of Morgellons, and its growth of self-diagnoses to the point of tens of thousands of people, constitutes an example of a kind of digital growth/accumulation resulting from a feedback chain mechanism. Because of the self-diagnostic and pathologizing capabilities of digital communication, an individual with tendencies towards psychosis who experiences symptoms of Morgellons can now run them through a search engine and arrive at an entire discursive manifold of information produced by others of similar dispositions, and in similar predicaments. The virulent spread of information takes what would otherwise be the isolated delusions of individuals and rapidly proliferates them across the whole electronic field of digital signification. Morgellons information sites, support groups, and discussion forums rouse up and actually contagiously reproduce Morgellons syndrome, through an accumulating array of delusional signification (although, perhaps, it no longer makes sense to refer to this with the psychologized language of delusion), which produces massive strings of sign upon sign in endless reference to one another. Thus, the disease is "disseminated" by digital means.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, the distance separating medical condition and "Internet meme" closes in.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, through this hyper-intensified inter-referentiality of signs, the desperate desire (and imagined reality) for a referent outside of this string—for the accepted authenticity of their condition, or the accepted verification of its reality by the

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<sup>13</sup> See Fidel Vila-Rodriguez and Bill G. MacEwan, "Delusional Parasitosis Facilitated by Web-Based Dissemination," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 165, no. 12 (December 2008): 1612.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Lustig, Sherri MacKay, and John Strauss, "Morgellons Disease as Internet Meme," *Psychosomatics* 50, no. 1 (January 2009): 90.

authority of medical science—is also reproduced.<sup>15</sup> Could such phenomena as Morgellons have been possible before the digital age? Could they have been possible before self-diagnosing technologies like WebMd, Google, and Internet discussion boards/forums/communities? Arguably, yes, but not to the extent of Morgellons and not with its momentum. Thus, the virulence by which Morgellons grew on the level of digital signification (and also, on the level of its non-digital media effects, such as its rise to congressional recognition and the public funding of its research) is what makes it unique and unprecedented. The virulence of Morgellons—the intensity and efficiency of its contagion—reflects the viral/virtual contours of digital culture: namely, the informational modality of intensified digital reproduction. Regardless of whether Morgellons is a form of mere delusion or an 'actual' physically transmissible, pathogenic condition, it remains an equally real (or hyperreal?) contagion—a contagion born of virulent digital culture.<sup>16</sup> Its pathogenesis can be traced all the way back to its most basic inaugural element: neither

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<sup>15</sup> As one paper published by the Charles E. Holman Foundation concludes: "It [Morgellons] demonstrates clearly that individuals in modern society still crave medical legitimization [...]. Medicine is powerful because if it does not believe you, neither do your employers or your husband or family [...]. See Harry Quinn Schone, "Morgellons: An Exercise in Medical Validation" (Charles E. Holman Foundation, n.d.), [http://www.thecehf.org/docs/Morgellons\\_anexerciseinmedicalvalidationbyHarryQuinnSchone1.pdf](http://www.thecehf.org/docs/Morgellons_anexerciseinmedicalvalidationbyHarryQuinnSchone1.pdf), 12.

<sup>16</sup> However, I should be clear that I do not intend to give any positive or conclusive account of the nature of Morgellons disease. Likewise, it is not my purpose to determine whether the condition is psychosomatic or dermatological. Regardless of whether the condition emerges as a physical condition, or whether it emerges as the collective delusions of thousands of individuals online, it is still worthy of being treated as something 'real'. Interestingly, the term itself—Morgellons—has been adopted by some researchers and practitioners to describe delusions of parasitosis in order to build "trust and rapport with patients to maximize treatment benefit," and to "allow for ease of communication [...]." After all, "what's in a name?" one group of researchers asks. Robert E. Accordino et al., "Morgellons Disease?," *Dermatologic Therapy* 21, no. 1 (January 2008): 8; 10. See also Jenny E. Murase, Jashin J. Wu, and John Koo, "Morgellons Disease: A Rapport-Enhancing Term for Delusions of Parasitosis," *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 55, no. 5 (November 2006): 913–914.

the germ, nor the virion, but the *bit*. Morgellons spreads not so much by means of a genetic code operating on/in/between hosts, but rather as an informational program.

Here, it may be useful to pause in order to make a terminological distinction/clarification between what is meant by 'pathogenicity' and 'virulence'. Borrowing from standard definitions developed in/employed by scientific microbial/virus research, *pathogenicity* is "a qualitative trait, referring to the inherent, genetic capacity [...] to cause disease, mediated by specific virulence factors."<sup>17</sup> The mere presence of pathogenicity and, likewise, the mere capacity to infect/invade a host, does not guarantee that a contraction of disease or a pathogenic contagion will necessarily occur. Whether a potential host-organism's exposure to a microorganism and infection by it results in the contraction and re/transmission of a disease "is the result of the specific host-pathogen interactions."<sup>18</sup> Thus, pathogenicity does not refer to the determination of virulence, but rather to the necessary conditions by which virulent phenomena are made possible.

*Virulence*, on the other hand, refers to:

a quantitative trait, representing the *extent* of the pathology caused by a microorganism. [...] Virulence is usually correlated to the pathogen's capacity to multiply in the host [...] or the rate of multiplication. It can also be affected by host and environmental factors [...] Virulence is also a relative trait, referring to the differences in the degree of pathology caused by strains of the same pathogen, or differences in the efficiency with which different strains can cause symptoms.<sup>19</sup>

Morgellons is perhaps a kind of emergent simulacrum pathogenic model. It may not be pathogenic in terms of the microbial, but it certainly is in terms of the *simulacrum*. By this measure, the mediatic swarm of recent Ebola news coverage, for example, is as

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<sup>17</sup> Joachim R. de Miranda et al., "Standard Methods for Virus Research in *Apis Mellifera*," *Journal of Apicultural Research* 52, no. 4 (September 1, 2013), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Additionally, see Arturo Casadevall and Liise-anne Pirofski, "Host-Pathogen Interactions: The Attributes of Virulence," *The Journal of Infectious Diseases* 184, no. 3 (August 2001): 337–344.

pathogenic/virulent as the object which it purports to mediate. Likewise, the methods by which images of birth defects caused by the mediatically-determined ominous “Zika virus” are spread are arguably just as (or more) virulent than the microbial force itself.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the sum of processes by which media purport to ‘inform’ the public about a viral epidemic *itself constitutes precisely such an epidemic*.

These relentless/repetitious exposures, these instances of anxious panic, hype, and the whole orgiastic spectrum of mediatic frenzy, exhibit a much greater degree of virulence than their microbial pathogen counterparts. These viruses of culture no doubt exhibit pathogenicity. Like microbial pathogens, they constitute parasitic forms of genetic code which lie eternally dormant in wait of a host cell to come along. And when this occurs under ideal environmental/ecological conditions for proliferation/propagation, virulence is unleashed into the world. As host organisms for these mediatic pathogens of culture, we find ourselves today, in the digital, immanent within precisely this ideal environment, overexposed to its conditions, and radically subject to its various pathogenic effects. Digital ecology describes a radically opened system: a situation of least possible resistance to the epidemiological transmission of information—a system defined by the least present mediating factors capable stifling virulence. The unleashed virality of and within digitality, then, is a kind of perfect storm/swarm.

Despite all the neophilic hype which surrounds and bombards contemporary technoculture—the ‘cutting edge’ technological advances; the supposed progress of scientific and historical change; the renewed magic, enchantment, and re/mystification of

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<sup>20</sup> For example, see Steve White, “Shrunken Head Virus Hits Brits on Holiday Who Are Warned Not to Try for a Baby,” *Mirror Online*, January 29, 2016, sec. UK News -> Zika virus, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/shrunken-head-virus-hits-brits-7273732>.

the world through instantaneous real-time communication—what does “digital culture” describe if not a kind of human-scale Petri dish? Or, to use its alternative name that may be more revealing apropos digital virulence: digital culture is here likened to the experimental complexity of a “cell-**culture** dish,” which has been somehow ‘blown up’ or massively enlarged. Unlike the Petri dish used to reproduce microbial cultures, however, this digital culture is one to which we are not relationally external, but rather immanent. Where are its cylindrical edges? And what lies beyond them? We might imaginatively speculate that there is nothing past those limits and, therefore, they are not really limits at all. As Baudrillard put it, “A boundary without something beyond it is unimaginable.”<sup>21</sup> The scope of the digital, like the scope of human culture, has always reached impossibly outward to the infinite. And is this simulacral complex of interplay between limit-transgression and immanence-transcendence not the signature of the very operations of radical openness/exposure/transparency which I have posited to be the ideology par excellence of information, and the definitive core (or corelessness) of the digital?

The best available answer to these questions is that there are no such answers. Where we find the image of the Petri dish, however, there is an infinite and radically incomplete *mer de noms* sprawling before us, comprising an interminable theoretical horizon of analogies, allegories, figures, forms, and simulations. Here, it is crucial to consider that theory is itself hyper-realized, digitized, and subject to its own virulent reproduction. To the question ‘can one ever get comfortable with this so-called postmodern incommensurability, this digital aporia?’, I ask in response: ‘why would one want to?’. The inconclusive conclusion of this dissertation is, thus, not a conclusion at all,

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: CTheory Books, 2001), 134.

but rather a sustained “coda” at the current point of textual closure—there is perhaps no better and more delightfully ironic way to approach the inevitability of such a closure than by means of a philosophical meditation on radical openness: namely, a meditation on the vertiginous dimension of contemporary technoculture, which is pregnant with infinite sign-potentiality, and is relentless/inexhaustible in the propagation and deployment of its own signification—a dimension which I have called the digital.

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