

# MAST

The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory

Special Issue:

## Blurring Digital Media Culture

Edited by Tony D. Sampson and Jernej Markelj

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## The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory

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# The Perilous Potential of the Blur: Digital Cultures Within Zones of Indistinction

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Given that digital culture supposedly emerges from the certainties of an on/off binary system of distinction, our current experience of it feels surprisingly indistinct. Certainly, in the intertwined political and technological contexts of the digital, the separation between what we might perceive as reality and fiction is increasingly blurred. Various political actors, from right-wing propagandists to vaccination skeptics, have indeed taken advantage of this moment of indistinction to sow seeds of confusion by fabricating alternative versions of social reality. They do so by weaponizing the affordances of networked media, and mobilizing what has been classified as disinformation warfare, fake news, or conspiracy theories. Our consensus reality, alongside the media, the university system, and its other crediting institutions, which shape our common frame of reference and help stabilize scientific and political facts, is being eroded and contested. Even if we respect the capacity of modern philosophy to test the concreteness of ideas of truth, objectivity, and reality, it is hard to deny that the political consequences of blurring distinctions between fact and fiction have proven troubling for e.g., liberal, leftist and environmentalist politics. For instance, institutes and think tanks funded by oil companies have

been repeatedly successful at instilling doubt in relation to climate change by distorting scientific evidence. This has, in part, helped to immobilize the full force of the environmentalist agenda, slowing down the introduction of various aspects of legislation. Along similar lines, alt-right online communities rely heavily on irony, which warps the distinction between mockery and earnestness, as a vehicle for disseminating a variety of xenophobic ideologies. The indistinctness of parody and sincerity online has become proverbial. According to the so-called Poe's law, a maxim of digital culture, any parody of extremist views will inevitably be confused by some readers for a sincere expression of the views being parodied.

Given these troubling political indistinctions, the focus of this special issue—the potentials of the concept of the blur—might seem counterintuitive. Surely, there is a need to rethink how our perception of fact can be sharpened as a tool against the fake. Yet, we have asked media arts practitioners and theorists to consider the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological usefulness and application of the blur in the study of digital media culture. This is because we are interested in exploring the various ways in which porous boundaries and zones of indistinction can be creatively employed for dealing with the often dangerous intricacies of our networked existence, challenging rigid political, aesthetic, and technological categorizations. This does not mean that we necessarily reject the idea of making clear distinctions, but we are nonetheless keen to investigate different modes of empowering entanglements and blurrings that might surprisingly bring reality back into the mix without the baggage of categorical separability.

The verb, to blur, generally means to make or become unclear or less distinct. As a noun, the blur points to a thing or an event that cannot be perceived clearly. Blurred images and concepts imply overlaps, collisions, interferences, nonlocations, vacillations, insensibility, inseparability, fuzziness, ambiguity, and even mess. Can focusing on these zones of indistinction

be productive in the already highly ambiguous domain of the digital? Is it not paradoxical, under these conditions, to suggest that we need to blur our vision to grasp the bigger picture? While acknowledging the dangers of losing detail, resolution, or definition, our contention is that blurred distinctions can offer a novel way of thinking about the complexities of digital media culture. We maintain that the blur is able to grapple with the messiness of networks, but also resists oppressive border regimes seeking to contain or capitalize on their potentials.

### **Blurry Politics**

A good place to start examining the political potentials of the blur is a compelling re-examination of digital political cultures provided by Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou. As a response to the efficient right-wing mobilization of networked technologies and their often unpredictable potential to disseminate propaganda, Komporozos-Athanasiou develops the concept of counter-speculations, which he understands as “struggles for visibility and obfuscation waged on the turf afforded by [networked] technologies” (123). Counter-speculations are left-leaning grassroots maneuvers that exploit the uncertainty and volatility of digital networks in order to blur the alternate realities established by right-wing populists and derail their agenda. Komporozos-Athanasiou offers instructive examples of these experimental maneuvers, which are in his view already in full effect. He discusses BLM's targeting of hashtags such as #AllLivesMatter, #WhiteLivesMatter, and #ExposeAntifa. By attaching random images and videos of K-Pop bands to these hashtags, BLM allies managed to hijack them and thus subvert the efforts of Trump's supporters and white supremacists to communicate and further their agenda. Similar cyber sabotage was orchestrated by teenagers on Instagram and TikTok, who in March 2020 circulated a call to disrupt Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They speedily

reserved more than three-fourths of the available tickets, but never showed up, which made the arena look spectacularly empty.

Komporozos-Athanasίου positions these counter-speculative tactics in opposition to those deployed by neo-populist nationalists. Unlike the latter, he suggests that counter-speculations “did not use technology to create a fake reality but deployed fakery to create ‘real chaos.’ They did not so much manipulate reality as tamper with an already existing ‘fakeness’ to turn deception on its head” (122). For Komporozos-Athanasίου, the political practices of these online tricksters are to be further distinguished from other progressive activist traditions represented by figures of the hacker, whistleblower, and fact-checker. Unlike sustained efforts of whistleblowers to expose the wrong-doings of their opponents, counter-speculations tactically weaponize the serendipities of our networked societies to muddle the messages of their opponents. In contrast to the highly developed and illicit computational skills of hacktivists, counter-speculations require a deep understanding of the attention economies but often rely on simple and wholly legal procedures. Different from fact-checkers, who require far more time and effort to debunk deceptive messages than it takes to produce new ones, counter-speculations are quick and move together with their targets. Betting on these disorienting online tactics, Komporozos-Athanasίου (123) asks if, in the era of hazy lines between reality and fiction, “this very blurring also opens up new paths for interrupting the disastrous cycle of culture wars” enabled by networked technologies.

The aim of further scrambling the already blurred consensus reality is aligned with the ethico-political aims set down by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project (*Anti-Oedipus, A Thousand Plateaus*), they suggest that the innate dynamics of capitalism are such that it ceaselessly blurs the distinctions that structure the



established order of things. Unlike pre-capitalist formations, which sought to enforce an unchanging order of things for eternity, capitalism depends on the continual (re)assembling of laboring bodies, raw materials, machines, and know-how, while seeking to continuously update and refresh consumer preferences. This unruly movement of capital is constantly eroding every established form of social organization. As the disruptive forces of this process escalate and expand, all conceptual and physical boundaries that organize our social world are put under pressure—these lines get blurred, scrambled, or displaced. With the rise of networked technologies, the proliferation of which is driven by the same capitalist process, these disruptive forces seem to have crossed another threshold. While the omnipresent and uninterrupted connectivity completely eradicates limits posed by distances and physical boundaries, our networked condition not only blurs reality and fiction, but also dissolves the separations between labor and surveillance, production and consumption, sleep and wakefulness, self and other, etc. Building on Marx and Engels' famous claim that under capitalism "all that is solid melts into air," Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the muddled blurriness of our era. They align this scrambling dynamic of capital with the process of schizophrenia.

While the erasure of said distinctions is often rightly associated with a great deal of concern, Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the emancipatory potentials of capital's disruptiveness. The scrambling of clear distinctions in their view undermines established structures of power. As effectively argued by Michel Foucault ("The Subject and Power"), power operates by permanently classifying individuals and phenomena into distinct categories.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault suggests that the notion of individual, a distinct entity separated from the nameless crowd, is indeed the basis for the operations of disciplinary form of power. He proposes that disciplinary power permanently "categorizes the individual, marks him by his individuality, [and] attaches him to his own identity" ("The Subject of Power" 781).

According to his famous example (*The History of Sexuality*), it is only after the category of a “homosexual” gets constructed by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical institutions that their disciplinary influence can take hold. Homosexuality is thus no longer merely an act but becomes a feature that deeply permeates one’s identity, and determines how one is to be perceived and treated. The medico-juridical practices and discourses then start to organize encounters with “abnormal” homosexual bodies, prescribe what they can and can’t do, and thus impose limitations on their capacities to act. The risk of clearly established distinctions should be thus understood in terms of their exposure to power and vulnerability to regimes of knowledge. Although our societies might privilege, as suggested by Deleuze (“Postscript on the Societies of Control”), *controlled individuals*, data banks of geolocation data, social media footprints, and shopping cookies, over *disciplined individuals*, these risks undoubtedly persist today.

Indeed, we argue that the oppressiveness of forced distinctions is intensified in the age of algorithms, recommendation systems, and personalized ads. Along these lines, algorithmic classifications, and the risks they pose, are forcefully critiqued by Kate Crawford in her *Atlas of AI*. Analyzing the operations of AI technologies, Crawford investigates the “epistemological violence [...] necessary to make the world readable to a machine learning system” (221). Accordingly, processes of datafication employed by AI systems, such as emotion recognition technologies, inevitably reduce the intricate complexity of our world. By categorizing our facial expressions according to highly contested classificatory schemas of basic emotions, these systems “oversimplify what is stubbornly complex so that it can be easily computed, and packaged for the market” (179). These datasets of classification become the basis for extremely unreliable predictions and evaluations, which are already employed for the purposes of screening job applicants, assessing students in education, or maintaining shopping mall security.

“Institutions have always classified people into identity categories,” suggests Crawford, “narrowing personhood and cutting it down into precisely measured boxes. Machine learning allows that to happen at scale” and thus, not unlike the medico-judicial complex of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, forces “a way of seeing into the world while claiming scientific neutrality” (220).

The emancipatory potentials of the schizophrenic process, which Deleuze and Guattari align with the disruptive forces of capitalism, should be understood precisely against the background of these oppressive classifications. While the paranoid forces of authority police the borders that define these classifications to safeguard the established order of things, schizophrenia induced by the capitalist dynamic constantly breaks away from these forced distinctions and muddles them. Being unattached to binary oppositions like normal and abnormal, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a schizophrenic can evade the functioning of power. In *Anti-Oedipus*, they dramatize this subversion of compulsory distinctions by providing an example of a schizophrenic being questioned by agents of social authority. When interrogated by a policeman, the schizophrenic “deliberately *scrambles all the codes*, by quickly shifting from one to another, according to the questions asked him, never giving the same explanation from one day to the next, never invoking the same genealogy, never recording the same event in the same way” (15). For Deleuze and Guattari, the movement of schizophrenia complexifies and blurs binary oppositions; it stuffs them with meanings by weaving a network of connections and undermines them from within. The classificatory categories in this way become over-stuffed and de-familiarized, which can effectively destabilize their organizing efficiency.

A similar kind of blurry politics is indicated by Hito Steyerl in relation to stifling algorithmic classifications (“Sea of Data”). In agreement with Deleuze’s claim that power is no longer a matter of just disciplining individuals, but also involves controlling individual datasets,

Steyerl adapts the famous Althusserian scene depicting the exercise of social authority with a policeman hailing a person in the street by yelling: “Hey you!” She suggests that when it comes to policing large-scale datasets, social authority corresponds to algorithmic operations capturing the signal from the noise of excessive data. These signals take the form of identified patterns such as dependencies, clusters, or anomalies. Yet, Steyerl points out that, like the hailing policeman, who creates the subjectivity of the subjected individual, algorithmic operations do not simply recognize pre-existing patterns, but in fact create them. In doing so, they establish groupings (for instance, statistical projections of gender, race, or sexuality), make predictions, or enable personalized clickbait. Steyerl suggests that another layer of political spam filter is added when these patterns are deemed improbable, which raises the suspicion of dirty data.

“Dirty data,” she explains, “are something like a cache of surreptitious subaltern refusal [...] to be counted and measured;” it is “where all [our] refusals to fill a constant onslaught of online forms accumulate” (“Sea of Data,” 6). Steyerl is convinced that, when it comes to online forms, the dirtiness of data banks becomes a reality as people, be it out of aversion, laziness, or incapacity, regularly provide inaccurate data. Yet, polluting databanks, blurring them by registering intentionally irregular or disruptive behavior into algorithmic visibility regimes, can be a political form of resistance as well. Along these lines, an instructive example of such tactical blurring of data is offered by Komporozos-Athanasiou. He discusses a tactical swarming of Trump’s online merchandize shop performed by a coordinated group of saboteurs who were “‘holding’ campaign merchandize products in online shopping carts and indefinitely suspending checkout payments” (122). Like the organized fake reservations of Trump rally tickets mentioned above, these maneuvers “fed the campaign bad data and corrupted its election database” (122), consequently blurring its reliability and usefulness.

## **Blurry Aesthetics**

We can trace a familiar disruptive aesthetic blur through a long trajectory in the arts prior to Steyerl's interest in dirty data. According to Adrian Stokes (qtd. in Williams 112), the "embracing or enveloping quality" of Turner's radical painting style, for example, is characterized by "indistinctness" and "loss of definition." The blur can be an unsettling literary tool too. Gatsby is an imaginatively presented illusive aesthetic characterization who remains purposefully blurred for much of Fitzgerald's book. Gatsby is a low-resolution figure, who like one of Roger Caillois' camouflaged insects, goes up against the rules of Gestalt perception, becoming blurred by assimilating the background into the foreground of the narrative. Challenging the perceptive rules of high-resolution imagery is also an aesthetic procedure that played an important role in the history of cinema. This gesture was, for instance, key to the Cuban Imperfect Cinema movement since it confronted hi-budget institutionalized filmmaking by insisting that "technically and artistically masterful [cinema] is almost always reactionary" (Espinosa).

The aesthetic potential of blur and low resolution has also been embraced by digital media arts. Again, Steyerl, for example, seeks to redeem lossy compression with her concept of a poor image; a highly circulated and reproduced digital image "often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur" (Steyerl, "In Defense of a Poor Image"). She suggests that this concept allows us to explore the tensions between the commodified consumption of viral images and their excluded visual economies. Prior to Steyerl, in the early days of media art, the remixability of the blur tool in graphic software marks what Lev Manovich considered to be one of the richest elements in his new media language (qtd. in Fuller 123). Like the lossy compression techniques used in JPEG, the blur tool works by lowering the distinction between selected pixels and

assimilating them into an indistinct image. Here again, we see how the detail of the image can become diminished in the blurring process with differing outcomes. On one hand, then, similar to the use of depth of field in cinematography, the graphic blur is a powerful attentive technology of distraction. It works by obscuring certain parts of an image so that the graphic artist can attract the eye toward more salient regions. On the other hand, though, we can see how Gerhard Richter's paintings of blurred photographic materials aim not to distinguish between salient and nonsalient objects, but rather, as Richter argues, to blur is a way "to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant" (qtd. in McCarthy) As follows, Richter's aesthetic methodology corresponds with Gary Genosko's "enemy of crisp synthesis" (96). It shows how the "fuzziness," and "muddiness" of indistinction can resist border regimes by sliding in between foreground and background; hiding like weeds in deterritorialized cracks. This is blur as a Deleuzoguattarian *Middle*.

Given its effect on media images, video, and audio, the blur tool is, it would seem, a matter of approximation rather than exactness. The blur not only helps us to imagine what is not in the gaps, but it also fills in these gaps! Indeed, like lossy algorithmic compressing of media files, the blur tool corresponds with interpolation. Significantly, unlike the selective evaluation of salient and non-salient pixels to control attention and distraction, interpolation anticipates the unknown value of pixels found in the gaps between known values. In other words, interpolation guesses what is in between, in the blur, in the middle; in the nonconscious of the network. This is a blurring that currently applies to both AI-generated images produced by DALL-E or Midjourney as well as text. Along these lines, drawing on an analogy between the blurring capacities of interpolation and recent interest in OpenAI's ChatGTP, Ted Chiang contends that the current wave of large language models used in AI function as a kind of "blurry JPEG" for

“paragraphs instead of photos.” Evidently, there is some potential herein to relieve some of the tedium of digital culture, since as Chiang points out, people are having fun with ChatGTP’s approximation of what is in the lexical middle space between describing mundane tasks, like finding a sock in a dryer, in the style of the Declaration of Independence, for example. However, these blurring tools are also prone to a more perilous kind of anticipatory digital media between, on one hand, the hallucinatory compression artifacts or outright fabrication of an AI imitation machine filling in the gaps, and on the other, the limitations of a human knowledge and fact-checking capacity that is, for the most part, nonconscious.

A more empowering aesthetic rendition of the blur is provided by Fred Moten’s writing on contemporary art and Blackness. Stirred by his encounter with Chris Ofili’s art exhibit, *Blue Riders*, Moten’s concept draws on his intellectual engagement with Nahum Dimitri Chandler’s paraontological reading of W.E.B. Du Bois’ question concerning why the Souls of Black Folk are made categorically separable from others. To be sure, there is already a blur in Du Bois’ response to his own question: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question” (Du Bois 7). Moten’s blur nonetheless dares to flip Du Bois’ “strange experience of being a problem” on its head by instead asking “what is not in between” (Moten 27) or where is the “nothing that lies between” (313). Pointing to Ofili’s intense exploration of the tonal depths of blue, Moten notes how the artist’s use of color becomes so “distilled” or blurred that it is “so black it's blue” (231). As a concept, Moten’s blur is an exemplar “phenomenon of indistinctness” (244); his “blue, black, blur” (313), becomes a significant “partition in refusal of partition” (246). It is a “general assertion of inseparability” which is still, nonetheless, a moving, “continual differentiation” (268).

Moten's aesthetic concern for what is "not in relation" is also evidently deeply political, and is, accordingly, mapped to Denise Ferreira da Silva's use of quantum entanglement as a conceptual resistance to relational separations that persist in, for example, the so-called "refugee crisis" between "citizens" and "strangers" (57). Silva's *Difference without Separability* is again, for Moten, an example of the blue, black, blur concept in action. In this political context, it is a blur, grasped as a mode of inseparability or nonlocality, which undoes the two defining elements of a Kantian program: *separability*, on one hand, and *determinacy*, on the other. In other words, inseparability challenges a methodology defined solely by the sense impression of known things, experienced in space and time, and categorized by way of quantities, qualities, relations, and modalities. We can see here how entanglement responds to a call to stay blurred! Indeed, as consummate versions of the blur, inseparability, and nonlocality can, according to Silva, ensure that "difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable estrangement, but the expression of an elementary entanglement" (65).

### **Blurry Methodologies**

The political and aesthetic trajectories of the blur already indicate several productive methodological and theoretical frameworks. A forceful way of mobilizing this methodological indistinctiveness is suggested by Deleuze and Guattari and their insistence on schizophrenic destabilization of clear conceptual distinctions. In opposition to a theorizing that paranoidly polices boundaries between categories and disciplines, enforces uniformity and hierarchization, and reduces difference to identity, schizoid theory seeks to generate transversal connections, permits conceptual mobility and segmentarity, and proliferates openings. The main aim of schizoanalytic theorizing is to unlearn (or disinvest) the conceptual boundaries that inhibit our capacity to act, produce and draw on this empowerment to further complicate and displace these



boundaries that organize and control our social world. It is within these schizoid zones of indistinction that Genosko locates what he calls “undisciplined theory,” a theory that constantly crosses disciplinary boundaries and blotches established categories. This special issue seeks to mobilize the power of indistinction to produce Genosko’s aforementioned “enemy of crisp synthesis” (96). It is our contention that this conceptual fuzziness is indeed necessary, as any prior insistence on clear distinctions might miss several key aspects of our networked existence. Accordingly, our perspective is aligned with that of Hillis *et al*, who emphasize “the necessity of resisting the imperatives of coherence and neatness when addressing [digital] phenomena that are complex, diffuse, and messy, and on incorporating some of this messiness into scholarly practice” (11).

Yet another way of methodologically approaching indistinctiveness is to repurpose Gabriel Tarde’s figure of the sleepwalker (Sampson). To mobilize the sleepwalker as a conceptual persona is to grasp the pre-personal interactions that are, according to Tarde, constitutive of imitation societies. From this perspective, Tardean societies emerge from a complex multiplicity of imitative interactions, which ceaselessly produce, reproduce, and transform themselves. What we might call Neosomnambulism, therefore, refers to the nonconscious entanglement of brains, bodies, and computers that exert influence on us even when we feel wide awake and fully in control. By focusing on this blurry intertwinement between sleep and wakefulness we might be able to rethink several distinctions central to digital culture, most of which are seen as induced by networked technologies. One such distinction is that offered between distractedness, often seen as bordering on sleepwalking, and protracted

periods of wakeful attentiveness demanded by digital labor.<sup>2</sup> Somnambulism draws attention to what precedes the distinction between sleep and labor, namely the collective nonconscious that is already operational in both of these states. As the work of influential experience designers and consumer researchers testifies, digital technologies are increasingly constructed to tap into this nonconscious register (neuro comfort zones), which shapes both our dreams and waking consciousness. Such an approach might allow us to engage with this register, and think through the multiplicity of nonconscious associations that connect and underlie networked subjectivities.

In Sampson's *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media*, the methodology of indistinctiveness is further expanded through the work of Caillois to advance a new materialist theory of mimesis. Through the lens of this theory, the blur between a foregrounded self and the backdrop of the other arises as a result of algorithmic operations that exploit the principle of homophily, for example.<sup>3</sup> These "lookalike" operations are embedded in lucrative social media marketing tools which produce and entrain increasingly similar user experiences. As follows, Caillois' innovation in thinking about mimicry is his suggestion that the blending of an organism with its surrounding is not a survival technique, but rather results from a disorder in perception, which opens up both perils and potentials. This disorder consists of the organism confusing its own body with its material environment, which triggers a disorienting destabilization of the inner sense of self. The *Sleepwalker's Guide* takes this idea forward to suggest that such

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<sup>2</sup> Johnatan Crary suggests that the distinction between sleep and wakefulness is in fact one of the few distinctions that have, until recently, remained stable. "In many ways, the uncertain status of sleep has to be understood in relation to the particular dynamic of modernity which has invalidated any organization of reality into binary complementaries. The homogenizing force of capitalism is incompatible with any inherent structure of differentiation: sacred-profane, carnival-workday, nature-culture, machine-organism, and so on. Thus, any persisting notions of sleep as somehow 'natural' are rendered unacceptable" (12–13).

<sup>3</sup> As explained by Wendy Chun, homophily is the idea that you are like what you like, and that you will like the things that people who are like you like. She claims that social platforms algorithmically generate their recommendations based on your likes and dislikes and suggest what others with similar (dis)likes were interested in. In this way, these algorithmic operations actively propagate segmentation with regard to these preferences.

contaminations of experience provide a materialist way of thinking about mimesis as it explains imitation societies in relation to the blending of physical borders, without prioritizing the sphere of interiority and representation. This insight provides a novel means for investigating the indistinctness cultivated by homophilic algorithms organizing social platforms, one that does not understand blending with others in terms of the interiorization of ideas. This suggests that the emerging indistinction between self and other is to be regarded “as a mode of access to preperception; a way of slipping into the insensible zones of user experience” (Sampson 7). It is an approach that sheds new light on Caillois’ methodological proposal that the primary aim of all study is to set about resolving distinctions, but also enables a reconsideration of threats and opportunities of these zones of indistinction.

The blur could also prove effective as a methodology to complexify the distinction central to our post-truth condition. As the *Sleepwalker’s Guide* argues, this distinction concerns a positivistic opposition between facts and fiction, which insists on the separation between truths and facts from feelings and moods. This distinction can be displaced by drawing on the thought of Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza suggests that, insofar as we remain passive, the “true” is simply that for which we imagine will enhance our affective disposition, and the “false” is that which we imagine will diminish it. Our discernment of what is factual is thus dictated by the multiplicity of previous affective encounters that we associate with the phenomena in question. This further suggests that the distinction between true and false can be bypassed *via* what Alfred Whitehead called the aesthetic fact. Whitehead muses that even the judgment of the sternest of logicians, who set out to establish if a given proposition is true or false, eventually gets “eclipsed by aesthetic delight” (qtd. in Sampson 12). As follows, Whitehead’s approach “challenges the positivistic distinction made between brutal facts and untrustworthy felt experience by arguing

for *a measurement of fact* founded on the intensity of experience,” which he aligns with aesthetic experience (13).

Another potent instance of the methodology of indistinctness can be found in the work of Susanna Paasonen, whose exclusive interview features in this special issue. Paasonen’s methodological approach foregrounds ambiguity and aims “to hold seemingly contradictory things together in dynamic tension [...] to understand that which it studies with sufficient degrees of granularity,” and attends to “irreconcilable tensions without the aim of resolving them [...] to grasp how things appearing to be diametrically opposed and mutually contradictory are in effect codependent or give rise to one another” (5). In her book, *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*, Paasonen uses this framework to challenge the dominant cultural analysis of new technologies, which suggests that we are addicted to devices and apps which distract us from boredom. To counter these reductive narratives of a digital downfall of humanity, she develops a nuanced approach, which examines dependence, distraction, and boredom as equivocal affective formations made of mixed feelings. Paasonen insists that negative and positive affective responses to digital media cannot be clearly distinguished, and suggests that “frustration and pleasure, dependence and sense of possibility, distraction and attention, boredom, interest, and excitement enmesh, oscillate, enable, and depend on one another” (4). By rejecting the binary division between addiction and agency, for instance, she argues that the use of digital media cannot be reduced to a simple pursuit of dopamine hits. Instead, our attachment to networked connectivity stems from the fact that we rely on it for managing school, work, and administration, creating and maintaining friendships and sexual arrangements, access to entertainment, etc. As such, digital media does not only cause frustration akin to withdrawal

symptoms when it breaks down but is in fact a precondition for a wide range of activities. This leads Paasonen to suggest that dependency should be seen as inseparable from agency.

Evidently, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach, which seeks to show that the traditional binary oppositions by which we make sense of our world, ourselves, and our technologies are always already blurry and unstable, gives us another way of foregrounding indistinctness. One of the ways that Derrida explores the instability of our conceptual binaries is through the classic philosophical notion of the *pharmakon*. According to Derrida, the *pharmakon* is a device that can function as a cure on some occasions and as a poison on others, or as both at the same time. A pharmacological object is, therefore, characterized by an indistinctness of potentialities, which challenges binary divisions such as that between good and bad, or curative and poisonous. In approaching technology from the perspective of pharmacology, Bernard Stiegler suggests that humans are constitutively reliant on different technical objects, which can inhibit or/and enhance our abilities. The technique of writing, for instance, has, according to Stiegler, provided us with a mnemonic prosthesis that grounds the very basis of Western rationality. Yet, he also suggests that this writing is simultaneously a source of inhibition as relying on external mnemonic support eventually gives rise to a decline in our capacity to remember and think.

As every technical object takes over and extends our cognitive and physical capacities, we consequently also stop exercising these abilities. Empowerment and inhibition are thus simultaneously inherent in our relation to technology. Yet, as rightly pointed out by Paasonen in our interview, when it comes to networked technologies, Stiegler's analysis remains startlingly one-sided as he insists that these technologies currently exhibit only hindering, toxic tendencies. As more and more of our capacities are outsourced to search engines, apps, and smart

technologies, Stiegler suggests, we face nothing but incompetence, discontent, and disaffection. While his work offers several useful perspectives on technology, his reductive account of digital media seems to be in need of a corrective. This corrective should do justice to the pharmakon as, to put it in Paasonen's terms, "a productive analytical tool foregrounding complexity, cohabitation, and simultaneity," which can help us move "beyond diagnoses [of networked media] lamenting the current moment as flat, lifeless, and pretty much doomed" (6).

### **Our Explorations of the Blur**

The contributions to this special issue explore the potentials and dangers of the blur from a number of different perspectives. As anticipated, the special issue features an interview with **Susanna Paasonen**, an accomplished interdisciplinary scholar whose work has been a lasting inspiration to us. Paasonen's work, which should not need an introduction, engages with a wide variety of issues linked to media culture, from networked affect to online pornography, and consistently displays rigor, ingenuity, and lucidity that renders her scholarship of the highest quality. An interview conducted by **Jernej Markelj** and **Claudio Celis Bueno** interrogates the notion of ambiguity that orients her work, and that provides a helpful perspective on the methodological usefulness of the blur. Paasonen discusses her uneasiness with the critical epistemologies of suspicion and the strong theories of oppression that they develop, a discomfort that spurred her interest in ambiguity. The conceptual framework of ambiguity is her way of blurring and ramifying these theories "so as to better account for the complexities within the phenomena studied." "As the multiplicity of meaning," Paasonen suggests, "ambiguity is a fact of life, and innate to cultural objects and phenomena, yet something that easily slips away in the cultural analysis unless one persistently holds onto the logic of *both/and*." Central to this special issue, her interview explores the blurriness of ambiguity and its effectiveness in analyzing

affective digital networks, politics of representation, algorithmic technologies, and other issues related to digital culture.

The practice-based contribution *Calypso Cave #itistrue* developed by **Stefan Karrer**, and curated and theorized by **Christopher John Müller**, offers an inspired investigation of the ways that technologies of image capture blur our perception and imaginaries of geographical places and spaces. Müller contextualizes their contribution by drawing on the still neglected work of German thinker Günther Anders, who suggests that the increased proliferation and dissemination of captured images also captures our imaginations. Anders claims that once technologies such as film and photography become the dominant means by which we store and curate our memories, our lives are no longer primarily lived, but mostly projected; that is, entrapped in the contemplation of images. *#itistrue* delves into these imaginary projections by investigating the online representations of Calypso's Cave located on the Maltese Island of Gozo. Karrer's and Müller's work builds on the database of over 4000 web-scraped images and their captions uploaded to digital photo-sharing platforms between 2004 and 2021 to trace the intricate confusion by means of which the imaginaries of Calypso's Cave start to morph with those of another Maltese cave called Tal-Mixta. By mapping this profound confusion, which is backed by Google Maps and continually reproduced by new images uploaded to Instagram and other platforms, Karrer and Müller wonderfully dramatize the role that the mediation of images plays in our perception of the world that we inhabit.

**Kirsten A. Adkins'** theory-based contribution "WHO ARE WE: The Blurring of Gendered Subjectivities in 21<sup>st</sup> Century British Military Promotion" focuses on the dangers of blurred visual aesthetics and ambiguity of meaning. She perceptively investigates how promotional videos aiming at recruiting soldiers employ out-of-focus images, conspicuous

omissions, and displacements to misleadingly frame contemporary warfare and the figure of the soldier. By closely analyzing the 2018 video by the British Army entitled *Who We Are*, Adkins demonstrates how the rhetorical and visual zones of indistinctions are mobilized to construct military collectivity and subjectivity in a way that is as abstract and vague as possible. As the blurred-out soldiers do not exhibit any clear identity markers, the video can, on the one hand, accommodate anybody, regardless of their class, race, sexuality, etc., to project themselves in the subject position constructed by the video. On the other hand, the blurred visual approach serves as concealment: it removes from view anything that could evoke the possibility of violence, injury, or death. Adkins' analysis of unstable images and ambiguous identities, which is informed by a wide range of productive theoretical concepts, also offers an insightful reflection on the blurriness of military gender.

The practice-based contribution "The Conspiritualist" by **Marc Tuters** provides an evocative exploration of the increasingly ambiguous contours of our consensus reality. He approaches this destabilization of the common frame of reference through the conceptual persona of the conspiritualist, which blurs the realms of New Age spirituality and conspiracy theories. Tuters' distorted video art portrays the current figurehead of this phenomenon, Russell Brand, an actor, and stand-up comedian turned YouTube current events commentator and holistic health guru. While Brand claims to be unconcerned with the left/right political binary, and does indeed often take a leftist perspective on economic issues, his selection of topics, together with his clickbait-y conspiratorial rhetoric, mostly seems to pander to right-wing audiences. This raises the suspicion that Brand's mixture of right-leaning hot-button issues and spirituality is ultimately motivated by entrepreneurial maximization of views and gathering of followers. Tuters' artwork channels Brand's business-savvy conspirituality into a series of screenshots, which, combined



with his original music, invokes the haunting allure of seeking truth and meaning in potentially troubling places.

**Jenna Ng** and **Oliver Tomkin**'s creative website wonderfully, and rather ominously, traces the blur concept through a trajectory of visual culture leading to what they call *The New Virtuality*. Echoing, to some extent, our point that the aesthetic of the blur is really nothing new, the arc of *The New Virtuality* seems to reach out toward an increasing indistinction between the virtual and the actual; a point when what is imitated, albeit in differing materialities, begins to merge into one. Here the antecedents and descendants of the blur are captured in the re-representational gaps between Magritte's *The Human Condition* series, the AI creation of "humans who do not exist", and politically explosive deep fakes. *The New Virtuality* is, nonetheless, ahistorical in terms of the break it presents with the past, where reality and illusion were once in sensible vacillation with each other, the virtual has now, it seems, violently slipped into an insensible real-time actuality. But what is conceptually at stake in *The New Virtuality* is a concern with the extent to which things can and cannot mix. Following an order of Platonic mimesis, as this essay tends to do, even where difference has disappeared, distance is destroyed, or boundaries muddied or violated; the gap always, potentially, reveals itself. The vacillation between the virtual and the actual is, as these re-representations suggest, a being that is always nearly there, but not quite. The copy constantly displays something that is never exact, some kind of ongoing violence. Forever incomplete, yet, perhaps, always becoming.

There are several zones of indistinction brilliantly located (if indeed that's the right word for an issue on nonlocality) in **Elena Pilipets**' insightful study of the "gestural virality" of TikTok. Drawing on former US president Donald Trump's worrying, yet wholly comical suggestion made during COVID that people could inject disinfectant into their bodies as a

possible treatment, Pilipets analyzes the gestural repetitions it stirred up. Like many other modes of digital contagion, and perhaps contagion in general, these Trump-inspired TikTok video memes were never going to be linear. They would never simply be repetitions of themselves! This is not a mimetic re-representation! Considered, instead, as a kind of memetic platform of production, there was never one feature of a TikTok meme that would basically replace another. Memes overlap each other, and as they do, they modify previous memes. Indeed, to study the “*distinct platform artifacts*” that engender these productions, such as the hashtag, the sound, the sticker, and the effect, Pilipets contends that we will need to follow the *indistinct* flows of “recommended videos, hashtag challenges, and memetic riffing.” This is not to say that the memetic blur is an utter mess. The virality of these shared gestures travels in between the absurd and the strategic; in between imitation and irony; in between shared nonsense, and the management of memetic association (attraction and distraction). What is particularly fascinating in terms of this special issue is that Pilipets’ blur describes an indiscernible blending of personal experience and collective expression in viral events. Again, this might be a universal mode of contagion, exemplified by one person’s illusory experience of separability that seems to obscure their inseparability from the cultural expressions of others.

**Alexander Wöran, Laura Ettel, and Isabella Iskra**’s contribution is focused on various conceptualizations that spin out of their experiences with the Archive of Digital Art (ADA). Herein, two general blurs emerge from digital media arts practices around questions of why, on one hand, media art is so hard to pin down, and what makes, on the other hand, a highly interconnected art practice “diverse and dispersed as a community.” The answer to both questions can be grasped, it seems, through the blurrings of transdisciplinarity that ADA has encouraged since its inception in 1999. For the purposes of this special issue on the various uses

of zones of indistinction, this is a very productive insight insofar as it evidences how digital art has managed to cut across disciplinary boundaries, including those partitions not simply confined to creative media arts practices, but venturing further outside of these inner parameters to bring in activists, journalists, theorists and researchers into the community. As follows, a “difficult to pin down” digital art seems to have produced just the “right amount of nimbleness and flexibility to transgress boundaries.” It can, as such, “explore new paths” and uncover new kinds of objects and relationships previously left undiscovered. Of course, like most silo-busting interdisciplinary ventures, there is always the risk that things become so blurred that a distinct area of practice might be impossible to preserve. To be sure, it is interesting to read how the blurs of digital art can produce objects that even resist archiving. But hey, don’t let’s get too hung up on that!

Finally, **Natasha Raheja**’s captivating practice-based study of digital media images presents yet another kind of “transboundary pest.” These pests are not exactly like those we might find in an archive. They are, after all, insects; locusts to be precise. But just because they are insects does not mean they are not media. Indeed, engaging with Jussi Parikka’s *Insect Media* thesis, Raheja’s conceptualization introduces a blurring duet, primed for the attention of media theorists. On one side of this double act, then, there is an explicitly visible insect blur produced when these initially solitary insects begin to swarm together. This is a process that biologists call gregarization; a process by which the solitary becomes a swarm. When filmed these swarms produce images not dissimilar to videos rendered using a motion blur tool. On the other side, the implicit operations of the blur resonate in interesting ways with our discussion above on Silva’s inseparability thesis. Raheja notes how these images of blurry swarms of migratory locusts not only collide with scientific jargon, but they also trigger farmer insecurity and nationalist rhetoric regarding immigration. In the latter regard, then, the locust swarm becomes a “slippery boundary

object.” In some ways, this rendering of the blur complicates Silva's thesis, as it further questions the affirmative power of the blur itself. To be sure, in order to resist the estranging forces of the separability of citizens and immigrants in the global rhetoric of the current “refugee crisis,” Raheja’s work reminds us that there is a further negative discourse of entanglement that needs confronting. That is to say, these images of swarming invaders need to be further transposed to an image of sociability, companionship, empathic associations, and gregarious mimetic communities.

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# Ambiguity and Affect in Digital Culture: An Interview with Susanna Paasonen

**Jernej Markelj and Claudio Celis Bueno**

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The name of Susanna Paasonen is well known to everyone working within media studies, affect theory, porn studies, sexuality studies, internet research, feminist theory, and several other fields. Her research engages with topics ranging from deep fakes to feminist humor, from the problems with online nipple censorship to the entanglements of drugs and technologies. The impressive breadth and interdisciplinarity of Paasonen's research are matched by its rigor and lucidity. Her work productively draws on a diverse range of advanced theories and complex concepts, which are presented in a way that can spark insight with an experienced researcher as it can with an uninitiated reader. This rare mixture of inspired conceptual moves, boundary-pushing, and clarity is on full display in her several monographs, which include *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (MIT Press 2011), *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play* (Goldsmiths Press 2018), and *Distracted, Frustrated, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media* (MIT Press 2021). The latter offers a much-needed critique of reductive and totalizing cultural analyses, which diagnose digital media as the culprit of contemporary disaffection. According to different popular as well as theoretical accounts mapped by Paasonen, networked media cause addiction, bring about boredom, and atrophy our attention spans. By mobilizing the conceptual framework of ambiguity, Paasonen sets out to complexify these strong theories of digital media



effects. She effectively blurs the boundaries between distraction and attention, boredom and excitement, and addiction and dependency, to nuance these generalizing and pessimistic diagnoses of our modern existence.

Productive engagement with ambiguity is a key conceptual characteristic of Paasonen's work. She employs this concept as a methodological lens aimed at bringing down polarised and dualistic understandings of different networked phenomena. Against both utopian and dystopian expressions of techno-determinism, the concept of ambiguity allows Paasonen to unveil the complexities and nuances that characterize digital culture. But ambiguity itself is an intricate notion with several definitions, parallel histories, and contradictory assumptions. In Hegel, for example, the human is an ambiguous creature that is both animal and more than animal. Against the logical principle of noncontradiction, ambiguity here refers to a mode of being in which something can simultaneously be and not be; being human means being historical and natural, animal and divine, finite and eternal, subject to both facticity and freedom. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir argues that despite the impossibility of existentialism becoming an ethical system, existentialism reveals that our entire ethical relation to the world depends on that radical ambiguity between freedom and causality that defines human beings. Parallel to these accounts linguistics and structuralism have assumed ambiguity as the key aspect of human language. From this perspective, meaning is always ambiguous because there is always a gap between the signifier and the signified, between representation and that which is represented. This structural gap differentiates meaning from nature, introducing ambiguity at the core of language, politics, and culture. The notion of ambiguity underlies also the concept of the *pharmakon*, revived by Jacques Derrida and repurposed by Bernard Stiegler, as it does affect theory. The strand of the

latter that is influenced by the work of Brian Massumi has emphasized the ambiguous character of affective intensities as opposed to the unambiguous expression of emotions.

Yet, as Paasonen rightly warns us, both Massumi's stark opposition between affect and emotions and Stiegler's analysis of the malaise produced by digital technologies lack ambiguity and complexity. Throughout her work, she manages to construct a convincing and productive notion of ambiguity that borrows from all these different sources. The result is a concept that does not attempt to cancel its own internal contradictions or ambiguities, but rather exploits them in order to highlight the complexities of our entanglements with digital technologies. The effort to privilege 'both...and' encounters over 'either...or' perspectives remains present even when defining the notion of ambiguity itself. This interview seeks to further explore Paasonen's conceptual framework of ambiguity, its usefulness as a theoretical and methodological tool, and its significance for internet research. It was sparked off by a talk that she gave at the *Noetics Without a Mind* symposium in Rotterdam in November 2022, and conducted over email between January and February 2023. Covering a range of issues such as affective digital networks, politics of representation, accelerationism, algorithmic technologies, etc., this interview is an attempt to show the productivity of such a concept for analyzing digital cultures today. As the emphasis on ambiguity inevitably distorts clear boundaries and complexifies definitions, it provides us with a valuable perspective on the usefulness of blur and its zones of indistinction.

**JM&CCB:** The conceptual framework of ambiguity has been one of the guiding threads of your research from very early on. This approach, which seeks to attend to the intricacy of things by emphasizing how they can be simultaneously good and bad, empowering and inhibiting, effectively orients your investigation of digital cultures. You draw on the concept of ambiguity to examine a wide variety of issues, ranging from online pornography, and affective formations in networked media, to the circulation of dick pics, and online remembrance of celebrity sex

offenders. What was it that first alerted you of the significance of ambiguity for the study of digital cultures?

**SP:** This had to do with my accumulated frustration with the forms of academic inquiry that I became socialized, and to a degree conversant in as a 1990s Humanities major: film scholar Constance Penley (3) associated these with “the righteous rush of negative critique” and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (126) with “paranoid reading” within cultural theory. Such forms of inquiry move to uncover the workings of power and ideology that have nevertheless been known and posited from the start, whether these are connected to capitalism, heterosexism, racism, or something else. This is not to argue against the value of addressing social relations of power, for the crux of Sedgwick’s critique has to do with circularity: as we always know that things are bad and since bad news is known beforehand, the ensuing analysis cannot yield many surprises in focusing to uncover that which we already know. For Sedgwick (126, 134), such “strong” modes of theorizing have become dominant enough as a “uniquely sanctioned methodology” to block from view other interpretative and epistemological practices, and to cast them as “naïve, pious, or complaisant.” Her polemic is concerned with the performativity of knowledge: what knowledge does, what we think we already know, how we come to know this, and what else might be known. It is also concerned with the forms of theorizing that get to be considered critical to start with. Sedgwick (130, 138) wrote in the context of queer theory in particular, intending to create room for other ways of “seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge” than ones operating as scanning, exposure, and unveiling. Such forms would be open to surprise, of *not* already knowing: “Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones” (146).

Since my Ph.D. thesis tackling cybercultural imaginaries from the perspective of gender in particular, finished in 2002, very much moved in a framework of critical uncovering, reading Sedgwick came with a poignant sense of recognition. Part of my interest in affect inquiry when moving into the postdoc phase had to do with finding alternative routes of doing critical work so as to better account for complexities within the phenomena studied. This became the focus of my research on mainstream online porn resulting in the 2011 *Carnal Resonance*.

As the multiplicity of meaning, ambiguity is a fact of life, and innate to cultural objects and phenomena, yet something that easily slips away in cultural analysis unless one persistently holds onto the logic of *both/and*. The slipperiness of ambiguity has to do with multiple factors, such as the prioritizing of macro-level questions over the micro-level complexities of everyday life as academic concerns, or the role of firm argumentation in academic writing. But, as John Law (3–4) argues, there is value in holding onto the untidy, messy, and contingent realities of society and culture. I suggest that, through the logic of *both/and*, it is possible to explore social operations of power *and* to address phenomena irreducible to them, so as to speak of their simultaneous existence; and to examine cultural objects and processes as innately contradictory and complex.

I find this particularly pressing in the context of objects and debates that seem overdetermined—ones connected to porn would be a prime example; those addressing the effects of data capitalism on culture and society could be another—so that we presumably already know what things are about, or what follows from them. Within data capitalism, we know about the ubiquity and invasiveness of surveillant tracking and data collection, as well as the opacities that these processes involve, so there is general consensus on the risks of data capitalism in terms of privacy and political polarization alike. We have also been warned of the risks that social media

poses for the mental health and well-being of young people in particular. At the same time, people younger and older use such platforms for a plethora of reasons and aims inclusive of activist organization, identity work, and world-making, the importance of which is irreducible to the exploitative logics of data capitalism (on its macro-level). With porn, we seem to always already know that it is based on exploitative labor practices and that its imageries are sexist, racist, and ageist so that it supports (straight white) male hegemony. The connection between porn work and sex trafficking is also often posited, despite the lack of evidence or larger-scale production studies concerning the genre. That porn comes in myriad sub-genres, that its performers and producers are a highly diverse bunch, that its imageries are hardly uniform, that porn consumption involves a range of taste cultures by default, and that it is not at all easy to define the object of porn in the age of self-shooting (is dick pic porn?) are all facts conflicting with this received knowledge. My argument would be that, no, we do not necessarily know what these phenomena are about in their totality, or at the very least what we think we already know is not all that we can know.

An attempt to hold onto the logic of both/and has to do with choosing to think less “against” than “beside” (Sedgwick 8) the work of other academics, so as to bring different perspectives together and think through their frictions and connections. The allure and rush of negative critique are, after all, persistently present also in how scholars engage with each other’s work in order to prove their own points. I am hardly suggesting that one should not be critical or express differences in opinion, but that an openness to different forms of knowing and making sense of things never hurt, are we to figure out something that we do not already know, from a different angle, with a different set of materials, concepts, or methods. Elizabeth Grosz (2–3) points out how “thinking against” is a gesture of dismissal rather than an invitation to dialogue.

Academic writing is by necessity an exercise of thinking together with other people, both living and dead. It is communication and hence social activity.

**JM&CCB:** One of the ways you theorize ambiguity is through the classic philosophical concept of the *pharmakon*, which refers to an object that functions both as a poison and a cure. This concept has been famously reinterpreted by French post-structuralist thinker Jacques Derrida and later taken up and employed to examine networked technologies by Bernard Stiegler, the French philosopher of technology. In one of your recent talks, you suggested that your approach to ambiguity is aligned with Derrida's but not with Stiegler's. As a way of further explaining your concept of ambiguity, could you please elaborate on this (lack of) affinity?

**SP:** I returned to Derrida when thinking of ways to frame my discussion of ambiguity in what became *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*—a book that took a decade to put together. Derrida's work is of course very much concerned with the complexities of meaning and non-binary forms of interpretation, and I have only recently come to realize the extent of his impact on my forms of thinking—I am, after all, a child of the 1990s academia. I have long found his articulation of the co-dependence between the curative and the toxic compelling: that the question is always one of both/and, and that there is no “good pharmakon” without the “bad”, or vice versa (Derrida 99). It then follows that analysis needs to hold onto both aspects of the phenomena studied so as to not prioritize the one at the expense of the other. The pharmakon, for Derrida, further disturbs the boundary work between the inner and the outer in ways that resonate with media ecological and technosomatic approaches to networked media as giving shape to experiences and ways of being in the world that I have been interested in pursuing. And if networked media has become infrastructural to how everyday life can be managed, as I think it has, focusing on its toxic impact alone cuts short ways of understanding how this happens, and what it possibly effects.

Thinking through Stiegler's work on technology as pharmakon could arguably have opened up similar lines of association, given the extent of his interest in this precise connection. His approach to networked media and cognitive capitalism, especially in his late work (see *The Age of Disruption*), nevertheless aligns with the generalized pessimistic approaches that I identify as a broad *Zeitgeist* diagnosis dominant in both academic and popular accounts bemoaning the nefarious impact of networked media. According to this diagnostic framing, the devices and apps that are designed to addict us are distracting us to boredom, eroding our capacities to think, relate, or remember: this is a strong theory of loss and destruction within cognitive/data capitalism. Or, to rephrase, Stiegler ended up foregrounding the "bad pharmakon" in ways doing away with the kind of messiness and simultaneity that I wanted to work through as this was manifest in my empirical research material. Since my aim was to both understand *Zeitgeist* diagnoses and think through the notions of dependence, distraction, and boredom that they operate with so as to foreground their inseparability from agency, attention, and interest, I did not find it fruitful to frame the enterprise on "Stieglerian" terms. There is also the perhaps aesthetic question of authorial voice, and my preference for Derrida's over Stiegler's, but it was ultimately a decision of how to articulate ambiguity as both a concern and an analytical lens. This is also the approach we took in our collaborative short book, *Technopharmacology*, with Joshua Neves, Aleena Chia, and Ravi Sundaram, where Ravi elegantly addresses the echoes of the Frankfurt School in Stiegler's work, and the constraints that these come with.

**JM&CCB:** One of the key conceptual distinctions in affect theory is that between affect and emotion. Authors like Brian Massumi argue that affect theory should establish a sharp distinction between these two terms, defining affect as a precognitive, pre-individualized, and non-representational intensity, and emotion as a subjective, cognitive, and representational

manifestation. When studying digital cultures, which trades in representations, audiovisual and textual content, meanings, and individualized expressions, some scholars have argued that this sharp distinction between affect and emotion can become problematic and counterproductive. How would you position your own research on digital cultures in relation to this divide between affect and emotion?

**SP:** It is a distinction fairly easily drawn on a conceptual level, but things get much more convoluted when moving into media analysis or any other form of empirical inquiry. My interest has consistently been in how affect becomes registered and felt in bodies, how these intensities then push bodies from one state to another, and how these bodies are also specific in terms of their social contexts and layered (personal, cultural) histories: from a feminist perspective, it remains crucial to insist on such particularities so as to not flatten out experience as some abstract human condition untouched by axes of difference. And if one is interested in thinking about how intensities are registered, there are basically three methodological avenues, as far as I can see: abstract theorizing, the tracking of affective traces in cultural texts (be these interviews, literature, or something else), and returning back to one's own affectations after the fact as a form of reflection. I have explored all three avenues which are all (differently) partial in that there can be no access to the immediacy of affect. One gropes after whatever remains, and makes sense of how the immediacy of experience can be retrospectively accounted for. It would seem artificial to do away with emotions as named states and interpretations of feeling within this.

There is of course no uniformity of opinion among scholars as to what the notion of affect means to start with: for some, it is an issue of impersonal life-forces; for others, clearly identifiable basic affects or social contagions of sorts. From early on, I have been inspired by Sara Ahmed's discussion of the inseparability of affect and emotion in how bodies shape and are shaped by the world. From the resonances and dissonances of porn to the circuits of shaming



involved in gendered online hate, I have been interested in how affect becomes sensed and made sense of in encounters between people, technologies, environments, and media content. And if one understands experience as at once affective, somatic, and cognitive, then these different layers of experience bleed into one another and come together in ways that may make them impossible to ply apart from one another. This is concretely about holding on to the logic of both/and.

**JM&CCB:** Your approach to affect shares some affinities with the influential account of Gilles Deleuze, who develops it through his interpretation of Benedict Spinoza's work. Like Deleuze, you see affects as enhancing, inhibiting, or ambiguous, variations in our capacity to act, brought about by our encounters with human and non-human bodies. Yet, unlike Deleuze, you posit that emotions, as mental states consisting of ideas and representations, are not merely a passive capture of pre-personal affective intensities, but possess agential force as they too can trigger affective responses. For example, you discuss a personal account of recurring frustrations with a malfunctioning computer reported by a female user (2015, 708). These malfunctions are productive of inhibiting affects that diminish her capacity to act as they cut her off from a variety of activities afforded by her networked device. Yet, you also suggest that these affects are further amplified by her awareness of the stereotypes of women as technically incompetent and a recognition that she fits this stereotype. This affective amplification arises mentally and is set off by an idea. How do you theorize this affective power of ideas, and how can it be operationalized for researching digital cultures?

**SP:** My approach, like probably all affect inquiry, owes to Spinoza's way of thinking about affective encounters as open-ended and to a degree unpredictable—how “the human body can be affected now in one way, now in another, and consequently it can be affected in different ways at different times by one and the same object” (Spinoza 133). When thinking about such objects, or bodies affecting and being affected by one another, it is important to extend focus beyond

material entities to bodies of thought and representation; the stuff of culture, narrative, and history.

Connecting with my previous point on the contextual specificity of bodies encountering other bodies (be these human or not) in the world, they are also attuned in certain ways. Affective encounters are contextual; people are hardly blank slates; things come with baggage. One way to think about is through the notion of somatic archives as reservoirs of experiences, affectations, aversions, desires, and attachments that accumulate and alter as we live out the world. Some of these find resonance, some entail biting sharpness, and some lose their affective impact while yet others gather force, but the idea is that we carry traces of affective encounters in our bodies. A surprising sight or sound may resonate with an experience all but forgotten, or resonances can be found through intentional reminiscence as practiced recall (again bearing in mind the affective, cognitive, and somatic aspects of experience). I started working on the notion of somatic archives in order to conceptualize the resonances and grab of porn tied in with sexual likes, fantasies, and fascinations—yet it is surely not only the sexual that resonates.

So, for example, one disappointing experience with technological malfunction may eat away at one's capacity to act; it can be retrospectively classified as embarrassing, surprising, frustrating, or irritating. Yet if such experiences repeat, they find resonance and possibly intensify so that the ensuing reaction may be intense enough to feel altogether disproportionate. Technological failures and glitches are further intimately tied to our very capacity to be and relate, so that the loss of internet connection or the inability to make an end-device work can cut down one's agency in very concrete ways, to the point of feeling cut off from the world. The anecdote you mentioned had to do with a kind of doubling (tripling?) of a sense of helplessness in repetitive experiences made all the sharper by a meta-level awareness of how such shrunken

agency aligns with stereotypical notions of gender and technology. These accounts of the sharpness of affect in moments of technological failure, which I collected from my students over several years, detailed acute ire and fury but, even more routinely, resigned reflections on mundane dependencies on devices, apps, and connections that are not ours to fully master while nevertheless being elementary to how we can be and act in the world. This point on infrastructural dependencies on devices and platforms was brought into sharp focus during the COVID-19 pandemic as the lives of us many shifted largely online. It may now simply come across as obvious.

To rephrase, engagements with the world, digital media included, involve orientations, attachments, aversions, desires, hopes, fears, and a plethora of other modes of relating. Within this, previous experiences intermesh with cultural narratives and diagnoses that we both use to make sense of the world and possibly resist their perceived biases and shortcomings. Lauren Berlant (21) writes of investments in objects and projections onto them as being “less about them than about a cluster of desires and affects we manage to keep magnetized to them,” foregrounding the innate sense of promise that such attachments involve. But such projections and forms of relating can just as well involve hesitancy or even downright aversion, which make dependencies on them ambivalent indeed. These orientations are the stuff of ideas coming from diverse sources that can be in conflict with or layer upon one another. All in all, I find it productive to consider bodies as always being in relation with, and impacted by one another, so that any counter involves not just physical bodies but equally bodies of thought (ideas, ideologies, representations, what have you). We are affected by these different and differently resonant bodies coming together in our encounters with the world.

**JM&CCB:** In *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*, you examine dependency, boredom, and distraction as *affective formations* of networked media. By focusing on these states as affective formations, you conjointly analyze the recurring patterns that emerge both in affective interactions between human and nonhuman bodies and in ideas employed to interpret the affects arising from these interactions. Is the concept of affective formation your way of negotiating the split between affect and emotion, body and mind? Can it be systematized into a methodological approach for studying digital cultures?

**SP:** Affect inquiry, from its Spinozan groundings, is resistant to mind/body divides to start with (considering how Spinoza related to Descartes), so arguably it offers means of keeping the body in the heart of things throughout. Since my book sets out to both address *Zeitgeist* diagnoses of dependence, distraction, and boredom in networked settings *and* to make sense of such dynamics of experience in order to understand the appeal, or resonance, of such diagnoses, I needed to find a conceptual framework for unpacking all this. It was evident to me that there was no doing away with considerations of the discursive—or, more aptly, that the discursive, the cognitive, and the affective needed to be considered together, and as steeped in one another.

Dependence, distraction, and boredom are not affects as such: the first is a relational connection, the second an issue of temporalities of attention, and the third is generally understood as the flatness of affect or as the absence of interest. So, what to call them? Predictably enough, I turned to Raymond Williams' discussion of structures of feelings as social experiences and ways of thinking characteristic of specific historical moments. But things did not quite fit: 'structure' was too fixed a term for tackling affect, there did not seem to be conceptual room enough for non-human actors, and Williams' temporal framing of how residual, dominant, and emergent structures of feeling connect with one another did not map onto a *Zeitgeist* narrative that rings familiar from those of past decades while also aiming to probe the future. I

then took a cue from Michel Foucault's notion of discursive formations where themes, perspectives, and concerns recur so as to give shape something like a formation but where such repetitions and formations are seen to derive from micro-instances, rather than result from structural forces.

'Affective formations' composed from these starting points seemed capacious enough a framing for considering the distribution of agency, attention, and interest in networked settings emerging from repetitive micro events—posts, hits, pings, videos, glitches—resulting in something socially resonant enough to feed into Zeitgeist diagnoses concerning agency, cognition, and the lost richness of life. Such diagnoses need to find resonance with people's experiences, are they to feel like something that speaks to, describes, or explains them. Hence the template of social media addiction that can be deployed when discussing attachments to platforms and the connections that they facilitate; or the discourse of shrinking attention spans and 'digital dementia;' or Douglas Coupland's poster project, *I Miss My Pre-Internet Brain*, broadly tapping into a sense of something being lost within the contemporary technological conjuncture.

Affective formations are then about ways of experiencing, understanding, and interpreting modes of feeling. They are both forms of experience emerging within the current technosocial context—and, in this sense, akin to Williams' structures of feelings—and about discursive framings of such experiences. My interest was to map out these modes of experience through heterogeneous examples in order to move away from dualistic framings where, say, attachment to devices translates as addiction, where deep focus has been replaced by perpetual distractions, or where enchantment has given way to the barrenness of boredom. Affective formations then also entail oscillations of intensities, from flatness to satiation and back,

considered as patterns of experience. This makes it possible to think of dependence and agency, distraction and attention, and boredom and interest not as opposites of one another, but as dynamics of experience encompassing both. As to how to systematize this as a methodological approach... I doubt to what extent that could be done beyond advancing non-binary modes of conceptualizing digital media. This is (again) an issue of holding on to ambiguity, simultaneity, and the pharmakon-like characteristics of media.

**JM&CCB:** Since its ‘linguistic turn,’ cultural studies have focused on representation and meaning as key territories for analyzing social relations (and their reproduction). The ‘affective turn,’ instead, argues for a non-representational approach to cultural manifestations capable of grasping those asignifying forces that shape social formations beyond the level of representation. In the first case, there is a structural ambiguity of meaning that defines the political aspect of representations. As Trevor Paglen argues, it is precisely because the meaning of a given representation is ambiguous that representation becomes a territory of political struggle. In your work, ambiguity stems not from the non-fixity of meaning but rather refers to the simultaneous presence of mixed and contradictory ideas and meanings. In light of this, how would you define the politics of ambiguity and how does this differ from the ambiguity that defines the politics of representation?

**SP:** Since the unfixity of meaning is a general starting point for cultural inquiry informed by the work of Derrida, the work of representation is understood as a messy business by default. And if we do not set out to analyze singular objects, such as representations, but rather explore phenomena and events composed of myriad actors (and objects), the question of ambiguity expands to simultaneity, conflict, and contradiction among and across these actors. This is unavoidable, I think. The same applies to considerations of experience as composed of multiple

dynamics, attachments, and orientations—and to how affective intensities come about and are registered. In this sense, there is just no doing away with ambiguity.

The politics of representation extend beyond multiple meanings to basic questions such as perspective and voice, and these remain pressing concerns in how we understand the world. For me, a turn to affect has not been about moving away from representation or questions concerning meaning but rather about broadening the analytical agenda beyond the textual so that, for example, porn is seen as an issue of representation, genre, aesthetics, and conventions *and also* as material practices, technologies, affective resonances, economies, and more. Since ambiguity is about meaning, using it as an analytical lens does not really necessitate, or even afford, a dramatic turning away from political (or other) concerns involved in representation as such, yet it allows for considering these in tandem with issues extending this focus—as in the accounting for the non-representational. Rather than positing a division between the representational and the non-representational on binary terms (as one of either/or), I find it more productive to consider them as entangled with one another. I am not sure how viable it would be to outline a politics of ambiguity as such, any more than an aesthetics thereof: for me, the point is acknowledging the coexistence of seemingly irreconcilable developments and meanings, their mutual connections and fundamental complexities, as well as finding means for accounting this all.

**JM&CCB:** As you indicated in a recent talk, the conceptual framework of ambiguity seems to be productive also with the forced distinctions of algorithmic classifications and the epistemological regimes that they impose. Kate Crawford suggests that algorithmic systems “oversimplify what is stubbornly complex so that it can be easily computed, and packaged for the market” (179). At the same time, algorithmic systems seem to be structurally incapable of grasping the ambiguities and nuances of the affective relations that structure social reality. How can the concept of ambiguity be deployed to develop a critique of algorithmic cultures?

**SP:** Building on the premise that language comes with ambiguities (not a particularly bold premise at that), it is inevitable that algorithmic systems will fall short in grasping nuances in communication. The issue is explicit in irony and sarcasm abounding online where basically the opposite of what is meant is said for critical or comical effect, but meanings equally shift according to sociocultural contexts that algorithms are blind to. Recent experimentations with, and debates around ChatGPT and other more advanced chatbots are making this point. Such limitations are also evident in the logic of recommendations where streaming media services suggest similar content to that previously consumed when users might in fact be up to something else altogether—music being used for affective modulation specific to mood, moment, company, and circumstance, for example. Wendy Chun’s critique of algorithmic homophily, of how the logic of correlation underpinning big data and machine learning breeds not only a logic of sameness but also that of segregation (through sameness and difference), speaks of this issue while further digging into the social power dynamics involved.

I have been interested in attempts to turn affect into analyzable data in empathy analytics, which is a subset of sentiment analysis—from the uses of likes and other reaction options to more detail-oriented attempts to find correlations between emotional expression and types of online content (Paasonen, “Ambiguous Affect”). This economy builds on the logic of correlation (as in ‘if you have liked that, you may also like this’) and taxonomical understandings of positive and negative affect divided into further subclasses. The overall purpose is to bring qualitative angles to the ways of tracking user engagement so as to map out *the kinds* of experiences that paying attention involves for the purposes of sponsored content, advertising, and content production. Through such predictions, platforms aim to both analyze user moods and predict



what content these users might positively react to. At the same time, affect escapes capture in taxonomical classifications that such predictions build on: independent of the volume and granularity of data extracted on people's interactions, tastes, or likes, it is not quite possible to figure out what they may be into at any given moment, or how they make sense of things.

The issue here is one of ambiguity as both a thing intrinsic to language and meaning-making and the ambiguities involved in how we relate and connect to the world and the diverse bodies within it. Such ambiguity points to simultaneity that is not compatible with algorithmic, computational principles of operation that unavoidably simplify that which they sort out and predict. This incompatibility gives rise to spaces of critique, especially for critiques of reductionism, but also for broader reflection of what machine learning can do, how, and why, and what eludes it. Crawford's punchline of AI not being either artificial (trained as it is with very human-made datasets, carrying and amplifying the cultural bias that these comes with) or intelligent (in that it does not think, but calculates) summarizes incompatibilities in how AI is framed and what is possibly expected from it, and how it operates. Consider, for example, a meme-ish post circulating on Twitter recapping listings of the most important philosophers asked of ChatGPT that moves from an all-male Western top-10 panel to a requested listing of female philosophers, and the inclusion of non-Western (first male, then female) thinkers when this bias is addressed; when the first question is repeated, an identical all-male, all-white list of most important philosophers reappears. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this.

**JM&CCB:** *Dependent, Distracted, Bored* offers a convincing analysis of the narratives of disenchantment that point to cognitive and affective inhibitions and pathologies brought about by the accelerating speeds of digital media and capitalism. According to other cultural diagnoses, this acceleration should be seen as a revolutionary phenomenon that can disrupt established

power relations and open up the potentials for empowerment. We are a bit skeptical of both strands, those that critique technological acceleration in the name of a normative framework presupposing a more ‘authentic’ relation between temporality and subjectivity, and those that see technological acceleration as an *a priori* condition for a postcapitalist society. How would you position your own work in relation to this debate? Can the framework of ambiguity help us approach contemporary forms of technological acceleration without falling into binary and totalizing oppositions?

**SP:** I would like to hope so. Some colleagues have identified my book as optimistic, which came as quite a surprise as it is not all that peppy but basically seeks less fixed ways to account for the experiences of living with networked media. That a project setting out to resist generalizing diagnoses becomes interpreted as optimistic basically speaks of the power and dominance of more pessimistic accounts—of the dominant role that paranoid forms of inquiry continue to hold in cultural theory. Both accelerationism and cultural critiques building on the premise of disenchantment represent this form of inquiry, albeit in starkly different ways. They both build on the premise (or knowledge) that “things are bad and getting worse” (Sedgwick 142). Accelerationism is open to the possibility of things then eventually being subverted through a collapse whereas narratives of disenchantment are not, as they are premised on a kind of authenticity that has become warped. The argument that something has been lost and that things are getting worse presumes that things were once better. In narratives of modern disenchantment, pre-industrialized, proto-capitalistic, and agrarian contexts figure in this vein rhetorically, discursively, as well as literally. Yet if we consider how life was in these contexts in terms of social equality, the richness of experience, boring circumstances, or simply life expectancy, I am not convinced that the issue can be framed in terms of “then better, now worse” in any believable manner. In many contexts, this “better” and more authentic world would, after all, be inclusive of

serfdom and slavery. I simply think that we need different places to start from, and alternative modes for thinking about the world we live in than ones reliant on a figure of a better past lost.

Ambiguities also apply to the past.

My perspective can be best defined as thinking besides these debates: acknowledging them, and accounting for their logic and rationale, yet without subscribing to them. We are constantly made and unmade in our encounters with the world, which authenticity deployed as a kind of origin story fails to grasp. Contemporary life is about multiple speeds, both faster and slower, that we become more or less attuned to; there is no singular temporality to refer to, even when discussing a specific medium, media platform, or singular person. The speeding up of things has been a complaint voiced since the mid-19th century (with the invention of the wireless telegraph and railway travel)—it is something of a constant concern that our cognition cannot keep up with technological speeds. In the student essays that I worked with, speed is however not framed as a problem, but rather the lack thereof, as in internet connections lagging and resulting in an unbearable sense of stuckness. They also discuss high connection speeds as the prerequisite for focus, rather than a force of distraction. Clearly, something more complex is at play than a steady erosion of focus and memory as a kind of one-way street.

Judy Wajcman questioned this logic a while back while arguing for thinking about the mediated everyday in context-sensitive terms. Similarly, I am interested in theorization that moves through the empirical, not in terms of ephemeral “grounding” but as a commitment to that which Stuart Hall identified as the worldliness of cultural inquiry. In order to do critical work in this sense, it is necessary to engage with the stuff in and of the world, and to keep one’s modes of conceptualization on the move when doing so—this also means moving between micro and

macro levels of cultural analysis. If ways of theorizing do not meet lived realities, as accounted for by different people, something is amiss.

**JM&CCB:** Are there any phenomena or conceptual issues that in your view do not get sufficient attention from media studies scholars today? Does the field of media studies currently have any blind spots that should be urgently addressed?

**SP:** I am not quite arrogant enough to argue that I have a grasp of everything done within media studies globally. But resources for basic research are growing scarcer in my context at least, as there is a push for more applied, solution-based, and impact-oriented inquiry. This is not to say that media scholarship should not be engaged with social issues and policy-work, but that the spaces for theoretical work where such impact is not easy, or even possible, to show have narrowed down. And if there is a requirement to detail the impact sought and the methods applied towards this in the application phase, this requires to an extent already knowing what will be found out. As a full professor with some research time, I am acutely aware of the privilege involved in being able to take on more exploratory projects and develop them at the pace they require. So, there is the issue of funding policy that has a very concrete impact on what gets to be studied, and how.

Then there is the question of temporality in our objects of study which, combined with the “publish or perish” imperative for junior scholars in particular, risks things being rushed in order for the output to feel timely. Changes in the media environment are rapid so research on any social media platform, for example, is to a degree historical by the time any journal article gets through the review process; not to even speak of book projects. The rhythm of reflexive and conceptual work is not easy to balance with this sense of things speeding ahead, or research

trying to keep up with shifting techno-social horizons. This is probably something that anyone working on network cultures needs to somehow balance, but we do so from very different positions of privilege. Thinking can, after all, be pretty slow work.

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# Calypso Cave #itsatrap: Instagram vs Reality

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“When distant things step too close, closeness becomes remote or blurred, when the phantom becomes real, reality attains a phantomlike quality” (Anders 123).<sup>1</sup> It is with this short equation that Günther Anders seeks to document one of the profound ontological confusions that begins to set in as technologies of image capture allow for reality to be photographically reframed, stored, owned, distributed, and sent elsewhere. “Reality,” he notes, writing in the mid-1950s, “turns into the copy, into the likeness [*Abbild*] of its images” (202).

To illustrate the extent to which reality is transformed into a template for images, Anders has us imagine how tourists remake the cities and landscapes they pass through. Irritated by the uniqueness and frustrating non-transportability of the encountered sites, they each carry a device, “a kind of syringe” that can be magically applied from afar to “correct the nature” of these sights and make them exist in an open-ended series of copies that can be owned and transported elsewhere (204). The “real” St Mark’s Square, the one that really counts emotionally, is now no

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<sup>1</sup> All references to this source are my translations.



longer located in Venice, but in the photo album under the bed at home in “Wuppertal, Sheffield or Detroit” (205), and with this the captured image also transforms the lovely sight into an attribute of the self.

Yet it is here that photographic trickery also turns into a curse. For once the snapshot becomes our prey, the dislocated landscape begins to blur with “the museum-principle of curation” and even with the autobiographical one: “everyone now encounters and experiences their own life as a series of images, as a kind of autobiographical gallery” (206). With this, Anders concludes, life itself attains a phantomlike quality: it is no longer primarily lived but predominantly projected, for it has become entrapped in the plane of images, which only ever arrests past instants to ensure that they remain displayable and present. And the more this plane prevails, the more life is only ever encountered in the “Future Perfect,” it is lived as if it were already a memory, as if it were nothing but an insta-gram.<sup>2</sup>

There is a place on the Maltese Island topographical and biographical transformation our cameras can effect has become uncannily literal, empirical, and real: Calypso Cave. The absurdity of course already starts with its name, which wrote the myth of Odysseus into the landscape of Gozo long before the camera turned its image into a trap. For on one of the cliffs flanking the beautiful red sands of Ramla Bay, there is a cave “alleged to be the one referenced in The Odyssey,” “the cave where the nymph Calypso kept Odysseus prisoner for seven years after his ship was shipwrecked after a fierce storm.” “Calypso’s Cave,” Wikipedia continues, “is currently closed to the public for fear of collapse” and “is commonly confused with Tal’ Mixta Cave [sic] which is located on the other side of the bay” (“Calypso’s Cave”).

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<sup>2</sup> This opening section condenses key aspects of the short “excursus about photography” found in §22 of “Die Welt als Phantom und Matrize.” For a detailed discussion of this aspect of Anders’ work, see Kerstin Putz.

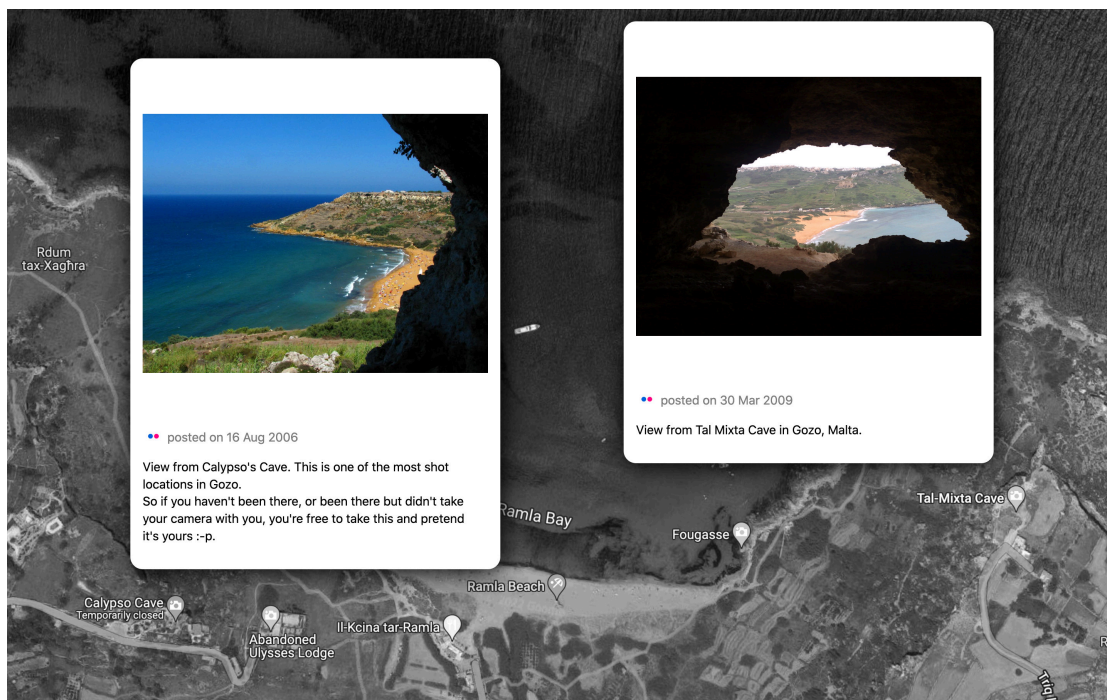


Fig 1. Stefan Karrer, *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, screenshot.

What the short, factual Wikipedia entry does not reveal is that Tal-Mixta cave opens onto a breathtaking view, one that the cave mouth itself frames with an enigmatic, perfectly mythical silhouette. With the rise of digital photo sharing platforms in the early 2000s, and the massive intensification of the lure of images these newly public albums create, the two caves begin to blur into one. And the blur through which Tal-Mixta cave morphs into Calypso's lair and into what one user calls the "Instagram Cave" (see fig. 4) seems geologically primed: in 2010, just as Instagram emerged to intensify and square off the lure of Tal-Mixta cave's captivating view, the original cave began to disintegrate and collapse. Stefan Karrer's browser-based work *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, developed with the curatorial input of Christopher John Müller, documents the gradual relocation of Calypso Cave to the other side of the bay and the blur of two caves into one.

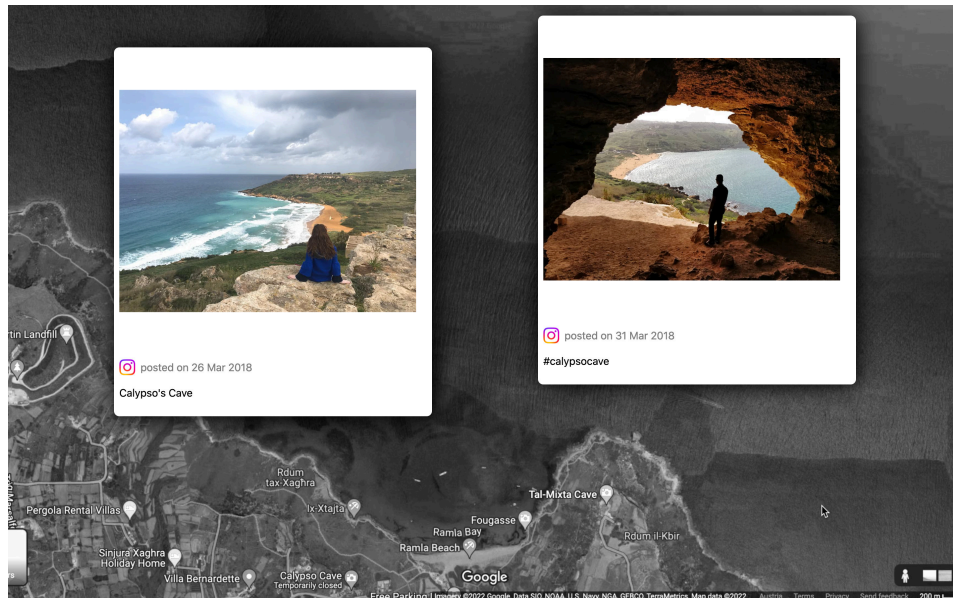


Fig 2. Stefan Karrer, *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, screenshot.

In terms of internet ethnography, *Calypso Cave #itistrue* tracks the emergence of a curious, geotagged meme that associates a (mistaken) location with a myth, thereby providing a platform for a set of open-ended commentaries through which “moment after moment, representation after representation, dialogue after dialogue—public participants memetically make their world” (Milner 32). Karrer’s artwork reveals that, at Ramla Bay on Gozo, the figurative process of participatory world-making Ryan Milner gestures toward has literally rewritten the map.

Drawing from a database of over 4000 found images and their captions that were uploaded to digital platforms between 2004 and 2021, the work tracks the association of the cave with the Odysseus myth, and its gradual relocation to the more instagrammable spot. The

resulting confusion has become part of the meme itself, with many posts declaring that they had found the real cave or else questioning the location.

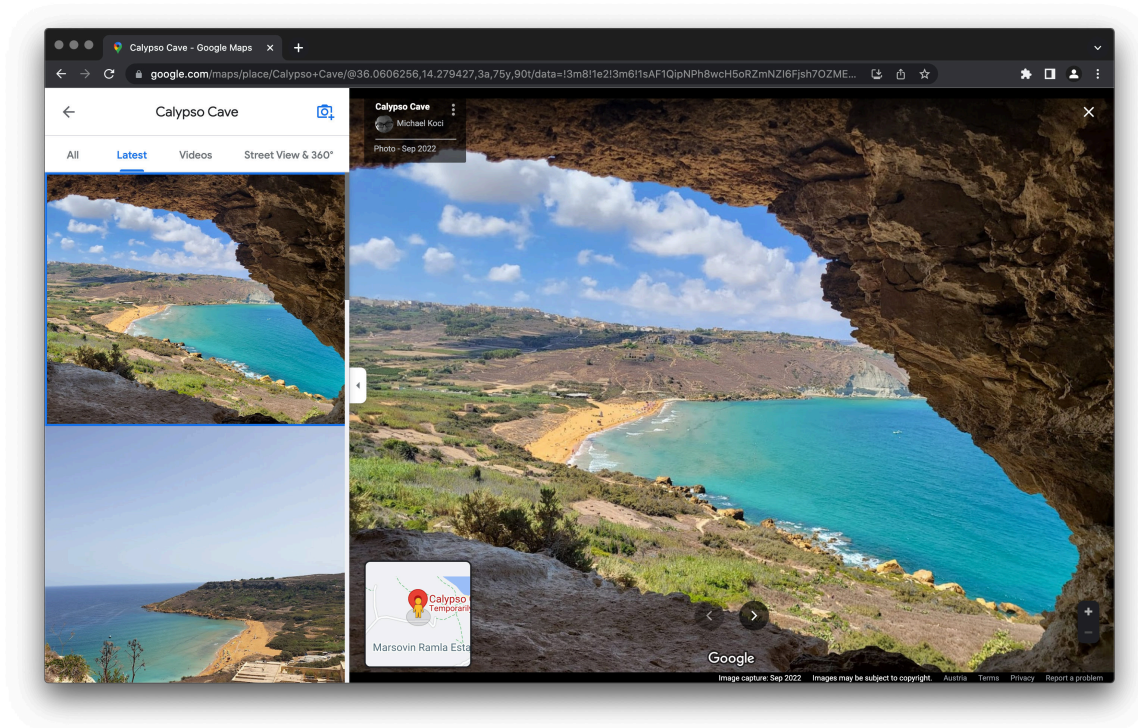


Fig 3. Google Maps images for the location “Calypso Cave,” screenshot, Sep. 2022.

The confusion is so profound, that the caves are now also misidentified and conflated on Google Maps (see fig. 3), with images taken from Tal-Mixta cave displaying as Calypso Cave alongside images taken from the correct cave on the far side of the bay. “I found Calypso Cave!” a post in March 2020 notes: “Every review I read says this iconic site is caved in and no longer accessible, but I still decided to check it out and I am so glad I did.” So, the databases and algorithms that automatically match map locations with user-generated images further confound the confusion of humans who are trying to figure out if they are in the right cave. For although they find the “real” cave they associate with Calypso (i.e., the cave that counts emotionally),

Google Maps also informs them that Calypso’s cave is “temporarily closed” on account of being collapsed (*#itistrue*).

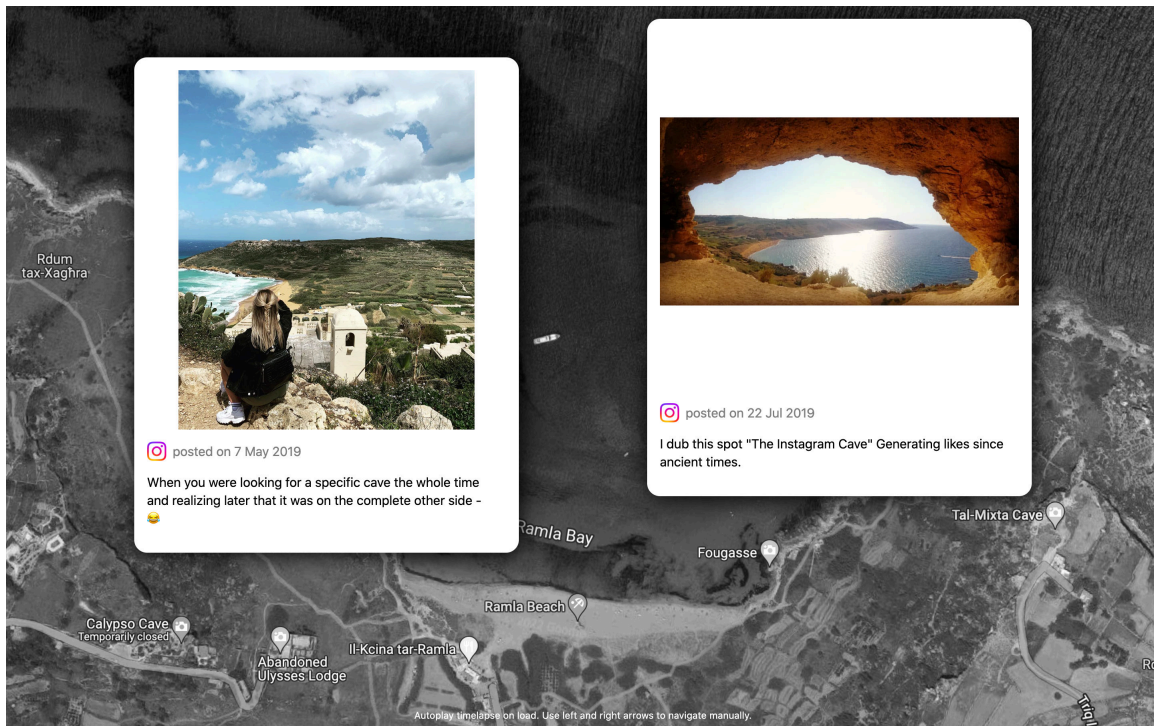


Fig 4. Stefan Karrer, *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, screenshot.

### About the Artwork

*Calypso Cave #itistrue* ([calypsocave.stefankarrer.net/itistrue/](http://calypsocave.stefankarrer.net/itistrue/)) was developed by Stefan Karrer for this edition of *MAST*. It translates the artist’s book *Calypso Cave #views on #views* into an interactive browser-based artwork. As a conceptual development, it seeks to document and dramatize the emergence of the Calypso Cave(s) as a topo-graphical meme that is linked to its own location ID. The work consists of a website with a screen capture video and a selection of over 60 social media posts<sup>3</sup> that have been arranged in an accelerating, roughly chronological

<sup>3</sup> As a living work, the number of posts vary, and the work will continue to evolve.

timelapse spanning the years 2006–2021. The timelapse can be interrupted using the arrow keys, giving users the opportunity to move through the sequence at their own pace.

Like earlier works such as *Cool clouds that look like they should be spelling something, but they don't*, *Calypso Cave #itistrue* is the product of an artistic practice that tracks evolving patterns of meaning with the help of content that is posted to the internet. While *Cool clouds* hinges on the often-repeated phrases and sentiments with which users caption images of “cool,” “crazy,” or otherwise affecting clouds, *#itistrue* isolates two photographic motifs that are connected to some of the Maltese Islands’ “most shot locations” (see fig. 1).

Because the two motifs are widely shared online, these images exist in an ever-growing series of highly similar shots that are continually replicated, distorted, commented on, and shared on various platforms in ways that allow us to intuit multiple often divergent motivations. By exposing how individual posts are consciously and unconsciously echoing others through repetition, variation, self-reflective commentary, and a number of further actions, Karrer’s artistic approach seems to tap into an effect that Henri Bergson describes as follows: “If I notice [repetition at work]” then “involuntarily I laugh,” whereby Bergson adds that the resulting turn of attention calls out and exposes how some “alien” machine automatism has taken hold of life (32).<sup>4</sup>

It is this blurring of seemingly spontaneous and unscripted action with a machine-like script that is perfectly encapsulated by the phenomenon of the hashtag itself. As Andreas Bernard notes, “The keyword attached to a hash sign is not simply a classification added later on;

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<sup>4</sup> “The comic,” as Bergson expands on this logic in an often-cited passage, “is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing”: it is “that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently, it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events” (64).

often enough the relationship is inverted; [...] pictures uploaded onto Instagram are often a reaction to a popular hashtag” (35), i.e. the image is only taken, the cave is only sought-out, because the hashtag #calypsocave already exists, and because it has accrued enough visibility to turn the prospect of applying it into a lure and powerful incentive to look for the cave. Yet rather than pitching the user against the platform or the human against some machinic other, Karrer’s work makes the formatting power of digital media visible in ways that convey a lived sense of joy and excitement and the at-once intimate and impersonal modes of togetherness that digital platforms act as conduits for. His work thereby opens a view onto the ongoing, affective “intensification” (Sampson 99) of our captivation by the aesthetics, interfaces, and promise of digital platforms, but Karrer here also productively breaks with academic paradigms that mobilize *The Odyssey* in discussions of the extractive and exploitative quality of digital platforms. Shoshana Zuboff, for instance, opens her book on surveillance capitalism by having us picture Odysseus’ exile and imprisonment by Calypso to ask if the “digital future can be our home?” (3).<sup>5</sup>

The perspectives opened by Karrer reveal that digital technologies are inhabited by their users in ways that find expressions in many different forms, and they track and reveal emerging connections to place, modes of togetherness, and constellations of feeling that are hard to intuit in the language of theory alone. As such, Karrer’s approach, and its particular staging of a collective entrapment in Calypso’s Insta-Cave, exemplifies how creative and artistic research practices, in the words of Anna Madeleine Raupach, can explore the “intrinsic merging of human and machine expression” (278) and “remediate experience” (286). In doing so, they can open us

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<sup>5</sup> The introduction uses the following quote from *The Odyssey* as its epigraph: “I saw him crying, shedding floods of tears upon Calypso’s island, in her chambers. She traps him there; he cannot go back home.”

to the way technological possibilities and automatisms intersect and blur with individual creativity, spontaneity, and feeling, and can thereby help us contemplate how mediation is intrinsic to these heavily idealized “human” traits.

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# WHO WE ARE: The Blurring of Gendered Subjectivities in 21st-Century British Military Promotion

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## **Abstract**

This essay is concerned with the framing and mediation of gendered soldier subjectivities in twenty-first century British military promotion. It enlists a deconstructed analysis of a 2018 army promotion film, aptly titled *Who We Are*, to propose that the visual aesthetics of blur produce a military subjectivity that is undecidable. In this short film, soldiers' bodies are often defocused, missing, or absorbed into the landscape. Such blurred aesthetics exist amid a messy discourse that accompanies US and Allied military actions carried out in the interests of the war on terror—also characterized by an ambivalence surrounding its targets, location, and timescale. In this respect, the condition of blur connotes an instability associated with the image, the body, the subject, and the conceptual framing of war. Blur in this respect diffuses the possibility of injury or death that would be central to fixed representations of the heroic military figure. The recruit is barely a subject. The soldier's body can hardly be lost, injured, or killed because they are framed as barely present in the first place.

**Keywords:** blur; sharp-focus; masculinity; identity; military recruitment, war

## Introduction

Toward the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, when US and UK troops were starting to withdraw from Afghanistan, a British Army YouTube channel ran a series of campaigns to recruit young men and women to join its continually diminishing ranks (“All British Armed Forces”).<sup>1</sup> Included on the site was a 2018 film titled *Who We Are* which offered a somewhat blurred account of “who we”—a military collective and/or military subjects—“are” as its title indicated (“Who We Are | Army Brand | The British Army”). In one section of the film, a commentary line says, “there’s people doing stuff.” This voice-over is accompanied by an image depicting unidentifiable military figures working on computers in a similarly unidentified interior. A foreground layer of the shot offers a graphic projection with words whose meaning is also ambiguous:

INFORMATION ASSURANCE

99%

PROCESS LOADING

DATA COMPRESS

Beside the words there is another graphic symbol (see fig. 1). It describes the outline of a male figure. On the inside of this shape, there is a question mark.

Figure 1 provides a screen capture of a quiet image that sits in the middle of the advert, a montage of several other military promotional films made by the British Army. Its purpose is vague and diffuse, an outline of a body in the absence of a definable value. The image forms an open question which points toward a blurring of military subjectivity, identity, gender, and the

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<sup>1</sup> UK Ministry of Defence statistics reveal on a year-on-year shortfall average of eight thousand a year, in recruitment in the UK.

body. A visual and conceptual ambivalence characterizes *Who We Are* and thus forms the focus for my investigation into the relationship between the aesthetics of blur and the construction of gendered identities in twenty-first century military promotion. Reflecting on approaches in painting by Gerhard Richter and applying a deconstructed approach to the 2018 military recruitment film *Who We Are*, this essay argues that blur constitutes a disavowal of the vulnerable body and with this, a denial of the possibility of injury or death that may be present in a sharp-focused depiction of the heroic military figure. Conversely, blur provokes a longing in the viewer that is found in its capacity to deny access to the scene that is blurred. In this respect, the potential recruit, engaged in viewing staged scenes evocative of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is invited to accept the fantasy of taking part in military action without confronting the real possibility of killing or being killed.



Fig 1. A cropped detail from a window reflection contains an outline of a figure, with a question mark, which points toward a metaphorical blurring of the body, of identity, and of gendered subjectivity ("*Who We Are*").

Who We Are was produced during the latter years of military operations against groups, cities, and nations carried out in the interests of the then-named war on terror, in the aftermath of attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Arguably many aspects of British military recruitment during this period were characterized by unstable visual aesthetics, redolent of the narrative discourse of the war on terror. At a NATO press conference in June 2002, the then-US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld reinforced his justification for the proposed Allied invasion of Iraq. “Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn’t exist” (Rumsfeld, “NATO”). In the same week, President George W. Bush reaffirmed the message by proclaiming that enemy threats “could” or “would” be found in shadows or they “might” be multiplying in laboratory cultures somewhere “in any dark corner of the world” (Bush). It was within this sociopolitical context that *Who We Are* imagines enemy threats *and* Allied soldier subjects less in figurative form and more as entities which could be here, there, or nowhere.

This essay directs its focus onto the blurred visual and rhetorical elements that would be overshadowed and thus suppressed in a holistic reading of *Who We Are*. A microscopic methodology, using a process of isolating frames and pixels from the sixty-seven second film, reveals that thirty-two of its fifty-two shots depict soldiers’ bodies that are blurred, hidden, or obscured. The intention here is to provoke new questions about the function of blur in the mediation of British military subjectivity. Who are these soldiers? Where are they? What are they doing? Why?

In this respect the blurring of identities in *Who We Are* may be imagined as a “trace” where suppressed or suggested elements offer new readings and possibilities for understanding the mediation of soldier subjectivity. In her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak translates Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of "trace" (xxxiv) as a track or spoor to be followed ad infinitum with no endpoint or resolution. To extend Spivak's formula, an aesthetic appeal of blur would be one of desire because it is "never found in its full being" (Spivak xxxv). Rather, blur promises something else, beyond or behind what appears on the screen or in the frame, ad infinitum. In Spivak's terms the British soldier subject and the war on terror may be perceived as something that is framed as "not there" or "not that." (Spivak 2016, xxxv). Blurred bodies are unidentifiable bodies—the soldier's body that is rendered in blur could be any body irrespective of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or social class. Similarly, the blurred body is barely present and therefore hardly recognizable as a subject, and in this equation the soldier who does not exist cannot be imagined as injured, killed, or mourned.



Fig 2. A voice over indicates that the ideal British soldier requires traits of "guts" to bring "glory." Yet its accompanying imagery uses blur to deny visual access to the heroic individual ("Who We Are").



Fig 3. I screen captured and enlarged a fragment of the scene in figure 2 as a deconstructed method for exploring the visual identification of soldier subjects in *Who We Are*.

### **Who Are We?**

A fragmented inventory of the blurred visual material of *Who We Are* uncovers the gaps between what the image is doing and what its caption or commentary says it is doing. Its imagery is counter-positional to the first line of the voice-over which indicates that “we” possess traditionally masculinized traits, including bravery, heroism, and valor (Barrett):<sup>2</sup>

“This is the story about the guts that bring glory. As some succeed and others do poorly.”

This voice-over accompanies a shot of four soldiers on a tank as it moves in slow motion through water (see fig. 2). In the center-frame, seen in figure 2, the soldiers are situated through a gauze of foregrounded layers—sunburst on the lens, mud, and water spray. Water droplets are

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<sup>2</sup> In his study of hegemonic masculinity in the US Navy, Frank Barrett observes that idealized character traits, including physical strength, resilience, and lack of emotion, have come to define the soldier as “an embodiment of traditional sex roles and behaviors,” reinforced in popular media imagery, including Hollywood stereotypes (77).

sharply focused while the figures are blurred. Here, gendered identities are unidentifiable and yet an assumption of masculine prowess is indicated by the voice-over describing “the guts that bring glory,” a gestural stance, and the phallic positioning of weapons. The water droplets bring an awareness of the presence of the camera, the imperfection of the image, and, importantly, the obscured framing of the soldier. As the tank moves through the frame, the water droplets increase in size and transform in shape to form blue-white viscous globs. The elevated positioning of the subjects in the frame, and the foreground obstruction, create a distancing effect which places viewers in the role of subordinated witnesses, where authority is suggested through the venerated positioning of the soldiers and the silhouettes of their aimed weapons (see fig. 3). Blur in this respect identifies the presence of a subject but renders the subject unrecognizable as indicated by the cropped image of figure 3. Yet environmental impacts of military warfare, symbolized by a tank rolling through water, are rendered in sharp focus and thus prioritized.

Blur offers multiple meanings and interpretations which constitute a pragmatism associated with the image that, in Hito Steyerl’s words, refuses to “make up its mind” (44). In this respect *Who We Are* provides a range of possible identities that may be a suitable fit for the potential recruit of any gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or social class. Such a condition produces for Lisa Purse a “structural ambivalence” that permits more than one viewpoint at once. Purse draws on Richard Maltby’s concern with Hollywood’s inclination to “displace responsibility” onto the viewer when addressing controversial subject matter (Purse 275; Maltby). She writes, “Such a preponderance of ambiguity has the effect of producing political ambivalence at the structural level: that is, the film itself literally becomes a container for contradictory ideas and interpretations, allowing spectators who hold contrasting views to each see their convictions reflected in the text itself” (132). In this formula, blur in association with military “guts” and



“glory” is both a source of denial and aspiration for anyone and everyone irrespective of “who” they “are.”

Blur is dirty or it is clean. On digital editing platforms there is a filter named Gaussian Blur which cleans the detritus on the image by blurring out the graininess, dirt, or wrinkles. The resulting image is perfected through manipulative digital processes. In ideological terms, blur may also be symbolically used to clean an image of injury or death or to create an undecidability around visualizations of victory or defeat. Such a concealment, in Judith Butler’s account of the framing of war, “jettisons,” excludes, or covers over its destructive realities (*Frames of War* ix). Blur then constitutes a simultaneous presence and absence within the frame. The soldier is neither there nor not there, neither represented nor unrepresentable. Blur, in its occlusion of dirt and detritus, disavows a clear visual representation of the unpalatable aspects of military action, including violence, injury, or death.

Yet paradoxically, focus-pulling techniques are deployed to draw attention away from certain aspects of the frame that are blurred, and toward those areas in sharp focus. The abstract translucent blobs in the foreground of the tank in figure 2 have the effect of controlling the gaze through the concealment of certain elements in the scene, including the subjective identity of each soldier. As Martine Beugnet and Richard Misek observe, visual blur has an augmenting effect when it is used as a “foil for high definition” such that sharp focus is further sharpened when it is juxtaposed with blur. What is strange about this formula is the idea that the “guts that bring glory” would be visually emphasized through abstracted elemental forms that are intangible, on the move, and incoherent. A blurring of trees, tanks, guns, and men makes them visually subordinate to the viscous globs that are sharply focused and closely aligned with the lens.



Fig 4. The soldier's collar and rifle stock are sharply focused using a shallow depth of field. His profile is softly focused and further obscured by foreground water droplets. Here identity and the body are rendered as less important than the supplementations in costume and weaponry that perhaps constitutes the "guts" and "glory" of British military subjectivity ("Who We Are").



Fig 5. Sharp focus and intrusively close camera work on the face equates with "doing poorly." The blurred possibilities of military success are represented in a match-framing of the preceding images that contain water droplets. Here the water is also blurred and diminished through its layering on the far side of the window behind the subject. The "unsuccessful" civilian is thus denied access to the diffused and therefore endless possibilities of military "glory" ("Who We Are").

The moving tank shot cuts to a soft-focus reverse profile of a black male soldier (see fig. 4). He is armed with his gun pointing downwards. A shallow depth of field in figure 4 emphasizes the rifle stock and sight with a similar foreground of water droplets. Blur is also conveyed through the audio where fast flowing water sounds are filtered through an echo effect to create further ambiguity. It is unclear whether the sound represents water surges, thunder, or exploding bombs. Another shot change is timed with the sound of explosions, and the music reaches a crescendo of a distant boom and a reverberation.

The next voice-over line, “as some succeed, while others do poorly,” brings a civilian character into sharp focus. Figure 5 reveals a close-up profile of a white man in a hoodie on a train that mirrors the forward expression in the previous shot. This time the camera is intrusively close. The natural backlight, from a train window, illuminates the rim of his profile and acts as a distancing filter between the subject and his environment, which is rendered in blur. Here, sharp focus accompanies the commentary line “doing poorly.” Not succeeding, and importantly *not* being present in an imagined scene of military action, equates with *inaction*, conveyed in the subject’s face and demeanor. Failure here is thus signaled and emphasized by the use of intrusive camerawork, a fixed stare, and sharp focus.

Here, a series of oppositional values are in play where the commentary line indicating success is accompanied by the image that refuses to identify the soldier subject. Sharp focus equates with a fixed representation of poor performance. The semiotics of the hoodie further indicate that “doing poorly” belongs to a civilian whose failure might be turned around on the imaginary battlefield. In this respect *Who We Are* reflects some of the tensions surrounding gender and social class in the widening of military recruitment practices, and of year-on-year falls in military recruitment during the period that the film was made.

## Gender and a Blurring of Identity

In *Who We Are* women soldiers perform in frontline roles, reflecting a strategic appeal for diversification in recruitment. Since 2019 British women have been invited to take up fighting jobs for the first time. However, these aspirations appear not to have been embraced by many women, and few had taken up these roles (“Number of Personnel”).<sup>3</sup> For cultural theorist Victoria Basham, despite a widening of recruitment practices, male heteronormative military codes continue to determine “who fights, who dies, and in defense of whom” (29). The strategic appeal for a wider demographic coincided with reports of a shortfall in military recruitment. In 2018 when *Who We Are* was made, the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced a deficit of over eight thousand soldiers per year over a ten-year period (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts). The report also observed that most military campaigns operated what is known as a “base-fed” model of recruitment, targeting mainly unskilled teenage young men and occasionally women (Crown Commercial Services). The MOD announced new opportunities “for individuals from all backgrounds” so that the armed forces would become “a leading equal opportunities employer” (“All British Armed Forces”). The model is also the subject of ongoing controversy. The campaign group Child Soldiers International used a Freedom of Information request to obtain the report published by the outsourcing company Capita, which held the franchise for military recruitment advertising. The report highlighted ways that deprived, vulnerable, mostly male, young people were targeted by the campaign (Morris). Themes associated with flexibility and inclusivity were also extolled by the then-Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson, who said, “I am delighted that for the first time in its history, our

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<sup>3</sup> In 2019, only 10.27 percent of the armed forces were women. The number of personnel employed in the British Army of the United Kingdom (UK) by gender was counted as 73,560 men and 7,560 women in May 2019 (“Number of Personnel”).

armed forces will be determined by ability alone and not gender. So, by opening all combat roles to women, we will maximize the talents available to our military and further make the armed forces a more modern employer” (“All British Armed Forces”). In a press release the MOD offered a more pragmatic response: “Simply put the infantry will be more effective in war if we include the best talent our country can breed—male and female” (“All British Armed Forces”). A shortfall of recruits, a need for diversity, and the encouragement of women into frontline roles is addressed through the language and ideologies associated with “breeding.” Such a formula is redolent of Michel Foucault’s analysis that the soldier may be bred, born, and then shaped “out of formless clay” (156) through British military training. In *Who We Are* soldier subjects often appear to emerge out of the elements: water, fire, gas, and earth. One scene depicts figures seeming to be delivered as if born or shaped out of the environment itself.



Fig 6. In a route march, gauze and mist turns the soldier subject into an unidentifiable component of the greater military “body of men” (“Who We Are”).

## We Are: A Body of Men

A voice-over identifies the soldier subject through class-based stereotypes as the “salt of the earth” and also “the awfully grand.” Its accompanying imagery, captured in figure 6, depicts faceless soldiers who appear to be delivered out of the landscape and mist—an echo perhaps of the military breeding program described by the MOD. The surrounding landscape is also barely visible while other elements are more clearly defined, including rifles fitted with bayonets, creases in camouflage uniforms, and soft hats. The soldiers’ faces appear covered over by gauze, which exaggerates the blurring of identity. Here the physical body gives way to the social body. Basham refers to state armies and their “tactical teams” as “bodies of men” (30). Blurred bodies are transformed into a greater marching “body.” Foucault also describes the military body in natural terms: “The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and ‘cellular,’ but also natural and ‘organic’” (156). The military body is made or even bred from *the salt of the earth*.



Fig 7. Gendered and ethnic identities are revealed in the studio photograph. In *Who We Are*, high definition operates on several registers. While the blurred body is synonymous military action, the fixed stare accompanies a stilling of the possibility of physical injury or death. In these conditions, safe from the turbulence of battle, the individual is celebrated (“*Who We Are*”).

Conversely, in figure 7, three photographs accompany a voice-over that describes the “awfully grand.” These images are rendered in sharp focus—much like those who “do poorly.” Common to both these examples—described through voice-over in oppositional terms—are

environments that are controlled, interior, and where subjects are inactive. This marks an abrupt change where stills depict the gendered and ethnic identities of seven proud graduates who look directly at the lens (see fig. 7). As an example of Beugnet and Misek's analysis, the blur of action where "guts bring glory" is augmented by high definition being associated with the photographic stasis of doing nothing and being "awfully grand." Similarly, "doing poorly" is indicated by the frozen gaze of the man in the hoodie, which also serves as a foil for the anxiety and desire associated with military action. In these cases, with the stilling of action, where the body is removed from the prospect of military harm, identities can safely be revealed. In many ways these photographs are redolent of the MOD's assertions that anyone and everyone, irrespective of sexuality, gender, social class, or ethnicity, can subject themselves to the "breeding" program of military recruitment. The sharp contrast in the singular depictions of racialized, gendered bodies is equally augmented by their blurred counterparts. In this reading, the blur of battle signifies a universalizing embodiment of sovereign power that is disassociated from particular men's and women's bodies. Furthermore, the negation of identity operates within a logic of unknowing; unidentified soldiers, unknown enemies, and a cover of confusion that provides ongoing sustenance for a war on terror.

In this respect, *Who We Are* operates on several contradictory levels. A blurring of the subject has the effect of displacing the body and the recruit's identity along with those aspects of military violence, which would include death, injury, and suffering. Yet for Beugnet and Misek, an imperfect image allows "a powerful way to engage our imagination, to play on our desire to see." Here blur operates a controlling mechanism which is reliant on the missing, obscured, or distorted elements within a scene, and thus *Who We Are* offers military scenes which deny access to the body and the subject, while opening up spaces for imagination. The viewer is

invited to complete the image and its associated military fantasy of adventure. This interpretation is redolent of the conception of “militainment,” defined by Roger Stahl as “state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption” associated with the participatory nature of the video game, where the absent presence of the blurred figure has the capacity to stand in for the viewer’s imagination (6). Using Stahl’s analysis, the technical construction of absence (of the enemy) and of agency (of the viewer) echoes the ideologies of the military action at the time. Stahl’s neologism is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s rhetorical questions in *Frames of War*: “As we watch video or see an image, what kind of solicitation is at work? Are we being invited to take aim? Or are we conscripted into the trajectory of the bullet or missile?” (xvii).

### **The Framing of the “Real”**

The art critic Hal Foster invokes a Lacanian perspective, where the blurred, flawed, or limited image speaks to a desire in the viewer to apprehend “the real,” or those elements outside of the framing of reality. In other words, Foster’s “real” refers to those aspects of the frame that are blurred, beyond, or outside of the viewer’s field of vision. He writes, “The perfect illusion is not possible and even if it were possible, it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented, indeed it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter a lost object” (141).

In Foster’s formula, blur works through its potential to deliver both anxiety and desire, not through representation but through its withdrawal. It is worth turning to the painter Gerhard Richter, whose work illustrates the tension between a simultaneous presence and absence within and beyond the frame. The painting *Betty* (1988) depicts Richter’s daughter, whose body is



twisted away from the viewer (see fig. 8).<sup>4</sup> Betty's posture adds movement to the painting which is further enhanced by a scraping of the canvas surface to give the effect of blur. For Achim Borchardt-Hume, it is her posture that provides a tension: "We experience an intense desire for



Fig 8. Gerhard Richter, "Betty," 1988, oil on canvas. Saint Louis Art Museum, [slam.org/collection/objects/23250](http://slam.org/collection/objects/23250).



Fig 9. Gerhard Richter, "Dead," 1988, from the series 18 October 1977, oil on canvas. Gerard Richter, [gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/baader-meinhof-56/dead-7689](http://gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/baader-meinhof-56/dead-7689).

her to address us and to release us from the mystery of her appearance. The impossibility of this desire ever being fulfilled makes it all the more fervent" (163). Here, blur acts as a reminder of the impossibility of the image. The viewer desires those elements that are beyond their means. In the case of *Betty*, the elements that are blurred or missing from the frame perhaps come to symbolize parental anxiety about the loss of the child and of childhood (Borchardt-Hume 164).

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Richter, German, born 1932; *Betty*, 1988; oil on canvas; 40 1/4 x 28 1/2 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Funds given by Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby Kemper Jr. through the Crosby Kemper Foundations, The Arthur and Helen Baer Charitable Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Van-Lear Black III, Anabeth Calkins and John Weil, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Wolff, the Honorable and Mrs. Thomas F. Eagleton; Museum Purchase, Dr. and Mrs. Harold J. Joseph, and Mrs. Edward Mallinckrodt, by exchange 23:1992; © Gerhard Richter 2019

By this account, the framing devices associated with *Who We Are* create a similar anxiety and desire for those elements that are denied to the viewer through blur and foreground obstructions.

Peter Gidal writes of ways that Richter's defocused photo-paintings reject "any single form of representation even in one picture" (27). The artist borrows and repurposes images from popular culture and news reportage which he then breaks down, covers over, or rubs away. By utilizing a scraping and erasing technique, Richter draws attention away from image content and toward the materiality of its surface. With this approach subjectivity is further called into question. The 1988 painting titled *Dead*, which is part of his series of Baader-Meinhof pictures titled *18. October 1977*, explores the tensions found in a desire to see and a simultaneous refusal to confront the horrors that representation allows (see fig. 9). The painting borrows, displaces, and reimagines a newspaper image of Ulrike Meinhof, a member of the West German terrorist group the Red Army Faction, after she was hanged in her cell. She lies dead and face up on a slab against a black void with a ligature around her neck. Her image is lit by a camera flash, which serves as a reminder that the painting is a representation which limits the viewer's access to, and full understanding of, the violence associated with the event itself. Richter says of the painting, "All the pictures are dull, grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the horror of the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion. I'm not sure whether the pictures ask anything: they provoke contradiction through their hopelessness and desolation; their lack of partisanship" (Richter 166). *Dead* perhaps offers a reminder of the limitations of representation but also its ability to filter violence and to avoid those aspects that are too difficult to confront. Richter's use of blur offers a reminder to the viewer that the subject, Ulrike Meinhof, is also a material object, a painting. Blur in this respect becomes a self-reflexive method that draws the eye to the materiality of the surface and to the frame—and the framing of

violence. Gidal writes, “Richter’s work abjures concepts of truth and the lived historical—in this vein the Baader-Meinhof pictures, 18 October 1977, are not history painting, they are the impossibility of history painting” (30). The “impossibility” of *Dead* then, as it is rendered through blur, creates a condition for the viewer where an encounter with the painting becomes a negotiated act of seeing both subject in Meinhof and object in a painting of Meinhof, and vice versa. All elements within the frame and the frame itself are made equal, “everything equally important and equally unimportant” (Richter 33).

The contradiction of blur is found in its capacity to simultaneously conceal information and to open up possibilities of looking, and of desire. Its hopeful nature lies in its avoidance of the fixity of sharp definition and thus privileges viewer perception and imagination. Yet for Richter the hopelessness of blur belies a superficiality associated with the violent image: its lack of partisanship, its refusal to fully show or name violence and horror as it occurs and is witnessed. Such a hopelessness is described in Butler’s account of the framing of twenty-first century war. Butler challenges a perceived visual and cultural erasure of corporeality in war. In this respect, what is at stake in *Who We Are* is not what is shown, but the way in which the image is constructed to either conceal or reveal how it shows what it shows. For Butler, “the ‘how’ not only organizes the image but works to organize our perceptions and thinking as well” (Frames of War 71). Furthermore, in arguing that the disavowal of the vulnerable body is an expedient aspect of the visual mediation of war, Butler offers the following reminder: “No amount of will or wealth can eliminate the possibilities of illness or accident for a living body, although both can be mobilized to service that illusion” (Frames of War 30).

Blur then, in this respect, becomes a material device for the disavowal of the vulnerable body and with this the gendered military subject. In *Who We Are* blur signifies lack of control,

of desire, and of danger. Sharp focus denotes the safety of inaction. Such constructions reflect Victoria Basham's analysis of military masculinity as she writes, "The soldier hero is a robust and highly influential form of idealized masculinity, particularly in the contemporary Western world" (30). *Who We Are* avoids depictions of muscular strength. Military power is associated with unstable images and of ambiguous identities. It is perhaps unsurprising that the viewer is denied the opportunity to identify with an embodied masculine hero that might directly represent the horror associated with the "guts that bring glory" articulated by the voice-over. Sharp images of soldiers' bodies engaged in military violence are not produced as objects of desire. Blurred bodies are constructed to operate as universal bodies, that in Williamson's new inclusive army could be any body of any gender. Indeed, if "base-fed recruitment" is preferred, they could be the vulnerable bodies of "our" children.

### **Conclusion: Masculinity, Identity, Blur**

The visual blurring of military identities in *Who We Are* becomes a visual phenomenon and a theoretical idea, which points toward an undecidability of meaning around the image, the body, and the gendered subject. Blur also connotes the ambiguous rhetoric and visual aesthetics associated with military recruitment and the war on terror. It is my contention here that many aspects of the British military recruitment campaign were characterized by visual aesthetics and a narrative discourse redolent of Bush and Rumsfeld's ambiguous rhetoric. In addition to this, a blurring of gender and social categories equates with a military recruitment campaign whose aim is to broaden its appeal to women and minority groups. *Who We Are* then is less concerned with identity; rather the film imagines military victory as an aspirational goal that may be achieved by anyone and everyone irrespective of "who" they "are." Finally blur equates with a framing that places heroic warriors as both present and absent in imaginary scenes of military action.

Soldiers' bodies that are defocused, disavowed, or erased are barely present and, in this equation, can hardly be injured or killed.

In closing it is worth returning to the first lines of *Who We Are*: “This is the story about the guts that bring glory. As some succeed and others do poorly.” These “guts” relate to the idiom of courage, nerve, and valor, and yet the use of the word holds many contradictory and therefore blurred interpretations. They are not entrails or intestines. They are not the state of being extremely disappointed or gutted. These “guts” have nothing to do with confession—saying something you should not say. No one is spilling their guts metaphorically—or actually—within these films. Nor are guts or gutting in any way associated with serrated knives or other instruments which would be used to open the abdomen of a fish or mammal before cooking. Guts here are not related to threat. These guts are not bloody or gruesome, and *Who We Are* is not a blood and guts movie. In this film blurred courageous subjects occupy an aspirational world in which many bodies are hidden. Blur diffuses the possibility of injury or death that would be central to fixed representations of the heroic military figure. The frozen inertia of sharp focus offers a drastic contrast with the turbulence of military action. Anybody and everybody with “guts” can have “glory,” irrespective of their race, class, social status, or gender—as long as “we” the viewer, potential recruits, or their loved ones don’t know who “they” are. After all, by definition, blur is unclear and undecidable.

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# *The Conspiritualist*

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The chaotic twenty-first century can already be thought of as a series of epistemic crises that undermine “consensus reality” (Berger and Luckmann) and lead to jeremiads about “the death of truth” (Kakutani). The latest such crisis is brought to you by *The Conspiritualist*. *The Conspiritualist* is an entrepreneur of “stigmatized knowledge” (Barkun). Their product represents a conundrum to the “demarcationist” logic of misinformation studies (Marres). Through channeling esoteric strains thought that lurk in the background of Western societies (Hanegraaff), *The Conspiritualist* blurs some of the basic epistemic categories that define us as Modern (Latour).



Fig 1. Screenshot from *The Conspiritualist*.

In its original coinage, by Charlotte Ward and David Voas, the portmanteau term “conspiritoriality” refers to a phenomenon in which “the female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self) and the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on global politics)” blur into one another (103). Ward and Voas imagine conspiritoriality as a “digitally native” type of phenomenon, embodied for them by the figure of David Icke. Icke believes that powerful business leaders and heads of state conspire to control the world’s population as members of a secret society with roots in a heretical sect of Judaism (Icke). For obvious reasons this has gained him a pariah status in the mainstream media, while at the same time making him a cause célèbre for other “free thinkers” (“David Icke Interview #1”). As evidence of the current reach of Icke’s ideas: in the spring of 2020, a YouTube video in which he connected COVID-19 symptoms to 5G radiation was viewed *thirty million times* before the platform removed it (Kelion).

Ward and Voas’s concept of conspiritoriality can be critiqued from a number of perspectives. Apart from the obvious gender essentialism, there is also the matter of “presentism.” As opposed to its being new to digital culture, scholars of esotericism point out that conspiritoriality can, for example, be traced back to nineteenth-century ancient wisdom narratives that trained initiates in the literacy of secret signs (Asprem and Dyrendal). While some aspects of that same tradition have also been associated with some of the darkest periods in twentieth-century history (Kurlander), these same scholars argue that modernity and esotericism have always been intertwined (Hanegraaff), and often through the medium of new communications technologies (Sconce). We may thus think of *The Conspiritorialist* as the embodiment of the dynamics of technological retribalization, as first envisioned by McLuhan in the early 1960s.

The objective of *The Conspiritualist* video project is to foreground these ambiguous dynamics through the social scientific method of the ideal type—defined as a “synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete . . . concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct” (Weber 90). *The Conspiritualist* can thus be understood as conceptual persona for exploring what Tony Sampson refers to as “contemporary zones of indistinction,” in which user experiences blurs into “nonconscious mechanical habit” (190). *The Conspiritualist* can be understood as an entrepreneur of the self for the social media “influencer economy” whose product is “clarity,” from the perceived manipulations of the corporate-controlled “mainstream media.” *The Conspiritualist* aims to cut through the din of noise and the blur of imagery that lulls social media users into a semiconsciousness state of sleepwalking. As a self-help guru, *The Conspiritualist* thus offers, as their product, the promise to awaken their followers from Sampson’s induced state of “neosomnambulism” (Sampson). Their promise is not new. The explicit metaphor of “awakening” from mechanically induced habit is foundational to media theory (McLuhan), cultural theory (Benjamin), and New Age mysticism alike (Ouspensky). Yet, inasmuch as it seems to present the ultimate of insights, esoteric clarity can also represent a real epistemic danger (Deleuze and Guattari 228). Moreover, unaware of their own “spiritual privilege,” *The Conspiritualist* tends to reduce societal-level critiques to matters of personal reform (Goldman).

Conspirituallity thrived during the pandemic as various social media entrepreneurs perceived pandemic mitigation measures as a tyrannical imposition on the sacred sovereignty of the body—both personal and societal (Birchall). This faith in personal sovereignty aligns with the neoliberal entrepreneurial self (Becker), tasked with nurturing their consciousness in a

competitive spiritual marketplace (Goldman). Of all the social media platforms, it has arguably been on YouTube, with its slogan “Broadcast Yourself,” where this entrepreneurial marketplace



Fig 2. Screenshot from *The Conspiritualist*.

is most developed, and most epistemologically dangerous. Trafficking in stigmatized knowledge, on YouTube, the figure of *The Conspiritualist* blurs distinctions that we normally use to make conventionally sense of politics, with anti-establishment ideas from different points on the political spectrum often blurring into one another (Finlayson). These are “lateral thinkers” (de Weck), whose brand is built on ventriloquizing the concerns of endlessly variegated assortments of niche subcultural audiences, who, for all their differences, share a politics that is anti-mainstream and anti-elite. In its blur of imagery, *The Conspiritualist* tries to bring all this cacophony into harmony—clarity from out of chaos.

There are a number of YouTube figures who might embody the paradoxes of this conceptual persona—including the elderly Icke. This current project explores *The Conspiritualist*

through the figure of Russell Brand, a flamboyant UK-based stand-up comedian and former Hollywood actor, who has successfully reinvented himself as left-libertarian political YouTube commentator and alternative health guru with a huge following in the UK—his YouTube channel had over 6 million subscribers at the time of writing. Over the course of the pandemic, Brand reinvented himself once again, by producing a consistent stream of videos using conspiracy theory buzzwords—like “Bill Gates,” “World Economic Forum,” and “The Great Reset” (Chilton). In these conspiracy theories, critiques of neoliberal capitalism are “blended together with truly dangerous anti-vaccination fantasies” (Klein).<sup>1</sup>

While YouTube has recently implemented more censorious content moderation policies to combat the spread of misinformation (de Keulenaar et al), Brand presents himself as a *commentator on* as opposed to *an advocate for* conspiracy theory. While his videos’ titles, descriptions, and thumbnails consistently promise to expose shocking secrets about the elite cabals ruling the world, Brand’s approach is only ever to ask questions and raise doubts, a rhetorical style that has been deemed “the new conspiracism,” or “conspiracy without the theory” (Rosenblum and Muirhead). This indirect approach of encouraging audiences to “do their own research” is a characteristic of how conspiracy theories spread through the medium of participatory culture (Birchall and Knight).

The project focuses on the platform vernacular of YouTube thumbnails, which tend to reproduce the sensationalistic aesthetics that are favored by platform’s engagement metrics (Marres). In promoting himself as a conspiracy entrepreneur (Birchall), Brand’s thumbnails typically intermingle personal branding with the latest conspiratorial keyword. As an artwork, *The Conspiritualist* compresses these thumbnails into image overlays composed of multiple

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of one of these conspiracy videos, see “The Great Reset: A Warning.”

partially transparent layers. The artwork is thus composed of a unique series of images taken from Brand's YouTube channel, corresponding to the post-COVID-19 period. On the left side, separated by a white border, is a ghostly image cohering out of the chaos of Brand: the self-styled YouTube messiah.



Fig 3. Screenshot from *The Conspiritualist*.

These images have not been edited. They were simply pulled from Brand's YouTube channel and arrayed chronologically without any deletion or manipulation apart from reducing each image's opacity to a series of frames each with a "multiple exposure" effect, resulting in a pulsating blur when presented sequentially.

The original soundtrack is composed and performed by the author. In combining sound and image in this way, the intention is to allude to the endlessly deferred feeling that draws people towards conspiracy theories—the idea, as the saying goes, that "the truth is out there" (Harambam). Following the principle of methodological empathy (Griffin), the ultimate point

here is this: if we want to address these kinds of big societal problems, the first step is to perceive what makes them aesthetically alluring.

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# The New Virtuality: A Creative Website on Blurred Boundaries Between the Real and Unreal

**Jenna Ng and Oliver Tomkins**

University of York

Our project, “The New Virtuality” ([thenewvirtuality.com](http://thenewvirtuality.com)), is an online multimedia work which explores the implications of highly realistic images that appear, interact, and socialize with human users, often seemingly “live” in real time. Such realism of and engagement with the image prompt reconsideration of the relationships between reality and visuality. How, then, to understand this media that so freely and near-seamlessly mix virtual and actual realities? How to place this phenomenon in media’s long history of blurred environments, while still appreciating their distinctive newness and challenges? What are the impacts of the new virtuality on our apprehensions and constructions of realities? How might this mediated reality relate—as code, as language, as consciousness—to the wider contexts of information that color contemporary times?

## **Description of Project**

Accessed as a website (see fig. 1), we implemented an interwoven three-pronged approach—academic thesis; image; fiction—to present the project’s ideas on this contemporary state of mixed realities. Distinct media and genre features underscore each approach, as tabulated below:

<p><b>Academic thesis</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textual reading</li> <li>• Theory application</li> <li>• Media archaeology</li> <li>• Historical continuity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Multimedia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Image arcade</li> <li>• Image galleries</li> <li>• Video essay</li> <li>• Exemplars</li> </ul>	<p><b>Fiction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative writing</li> <li>• Science fiction</li> <li>• Fragmentation</li> <li>• Interactive story</li> </ul>
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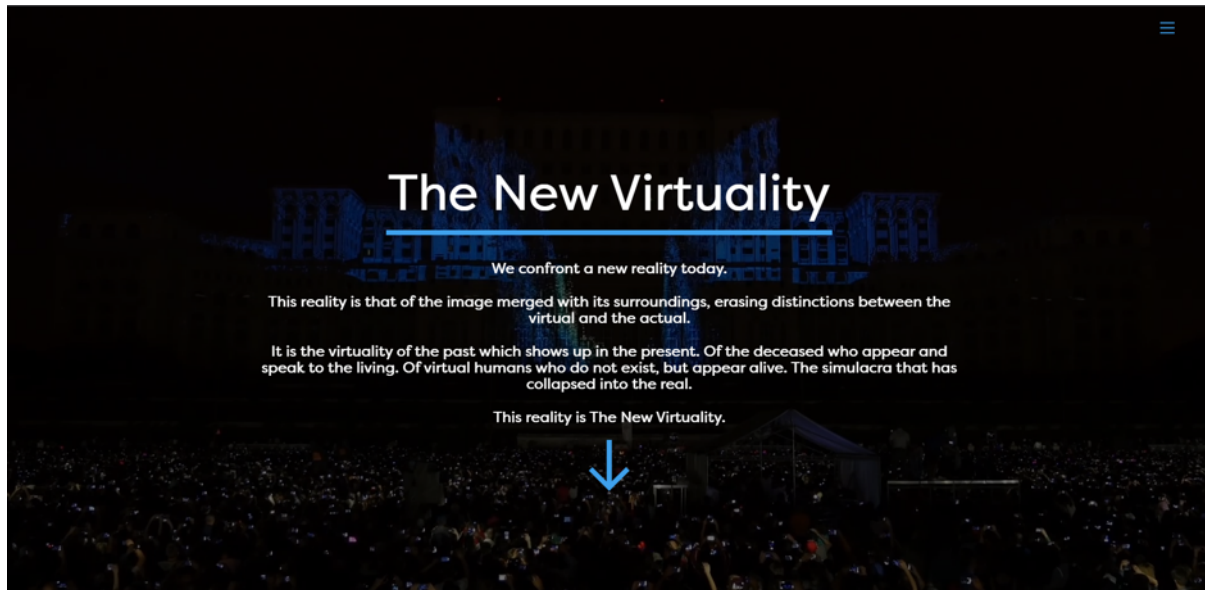


Fig 1. Screenshot of the project website's landing page.

## Academic Thesis

Drawing from readings of film and media theory, archival research (including reviews and paratexts), textual readings and media archaeology (Parikka), we wrote the project's academic thesis across four essays. The first ("Disappearing Boundaries") traces a historical arc of media which feature diminishing boundaries ranging across marketing practices, land art, theatre practices, emerging film genres and contemporary digital art. The second essay ("Disappearing Difference") extrapolates that historical account to argue for the importance of difference as not simply a premise of definition, but a space for moral judgement. The third essay ("Virtual

Humans”) explicates the new virtuality via the exemplar of virtual humans: highly realistic computer-generated images of humans or humanoid forms which appear, move, and even engage with actual humans in real time. The final essay (“The Unreal”) examines the viewer’s discombobulating vacillations between virtual and actual realities in the new virtuality, culminating into their almost heedless gluttony of the virtual. The essays’ aim is to collectively present and analyze the distinctive newness and challenges of invasive virtuality in contemporary visuality, while still retaining clear contextualization of the long media history of the virtual.

## Image

Images permeate the project in three ways. The first is an image gallery which rolls up alongside the text of each essay as the page is scrolled (see fig. 2). Consisting of still images and videos, each image gallery illustrates the essays’ textual references. In some cases, we chose the images not so much as a reference but a *coloring* of the text’s ideas, providing mood and setting to the argument.

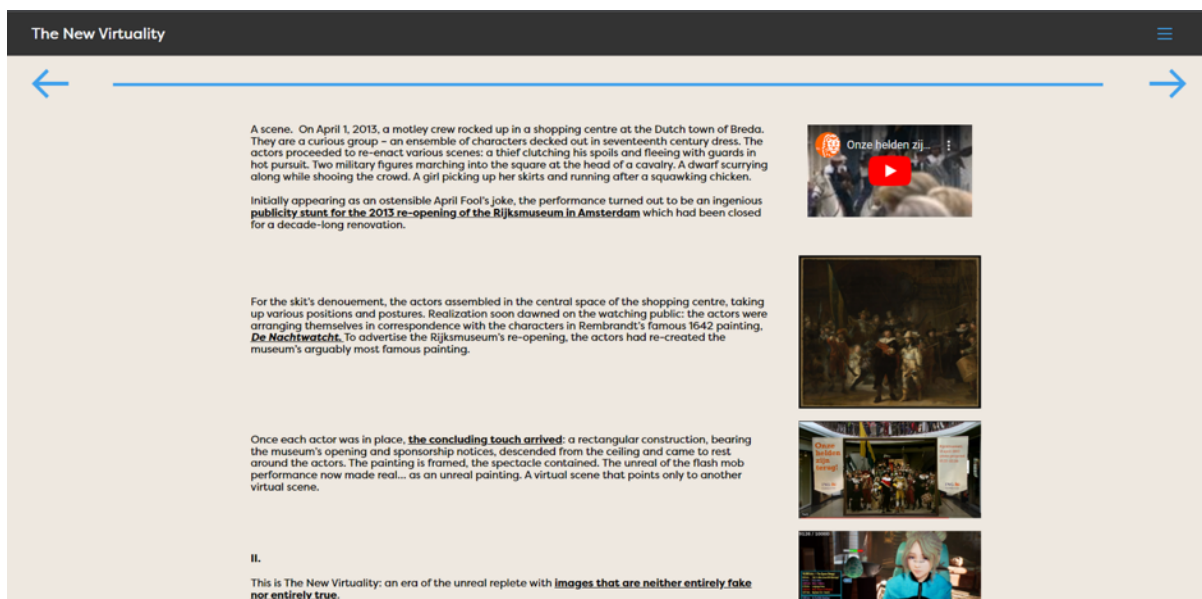


Fig 2. Screenshot of an image gallery alongside an essay.

Secondly, the website features a stand-alone image gallery, titled “40 Snapshots of The New Virtuality” (see fig. 3). This gallery presents a revolving arcade of images which reflect myriad examples of the new virtuality in its mixed realities. They further enliven and illustrate our argument.

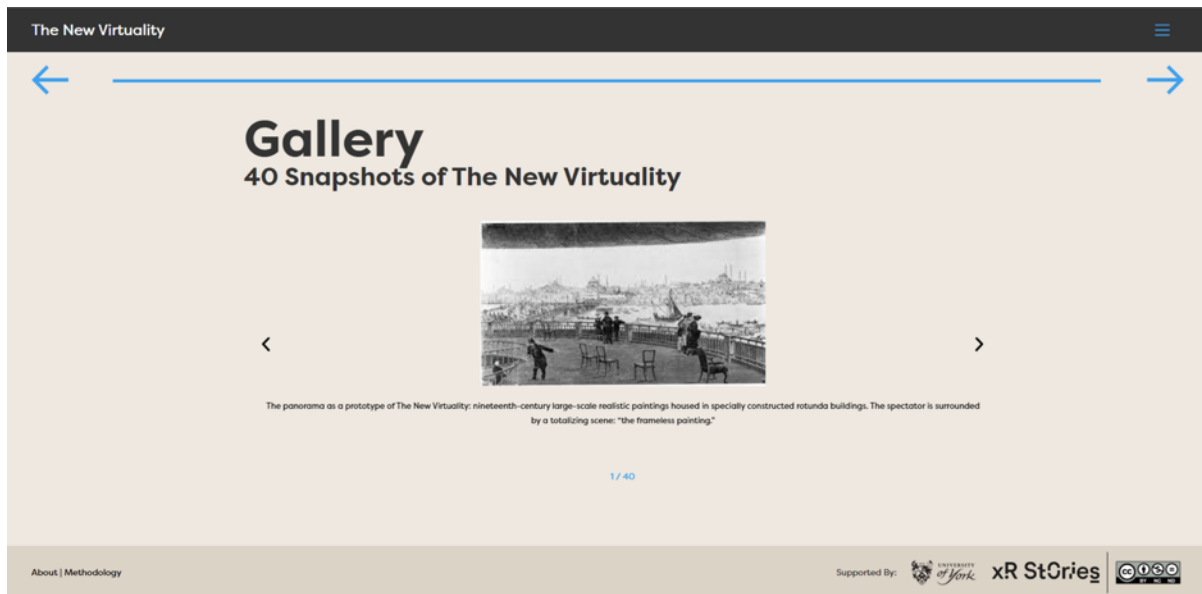


Fig 3. Screenshot of the stand-alone image gallery.

The project’s third presentation of images is a 33-minute video essay (see fig. 4). The captioned video presents the argument in a more accessible format as compared to text. At the same time, like the image gallery, it constitutes part of the argument as an audiovisual coloring of the poetics of the new virtuality—namely, the ethos of discombobulation that emanates from the new virtuality’s blurred media boundaries. The video thus functions as a self-reflective “mood board” to the argument with its narration written in a conscious rhetoric and meter of pensiveness and elegy, and images and music chosen in similar veins.

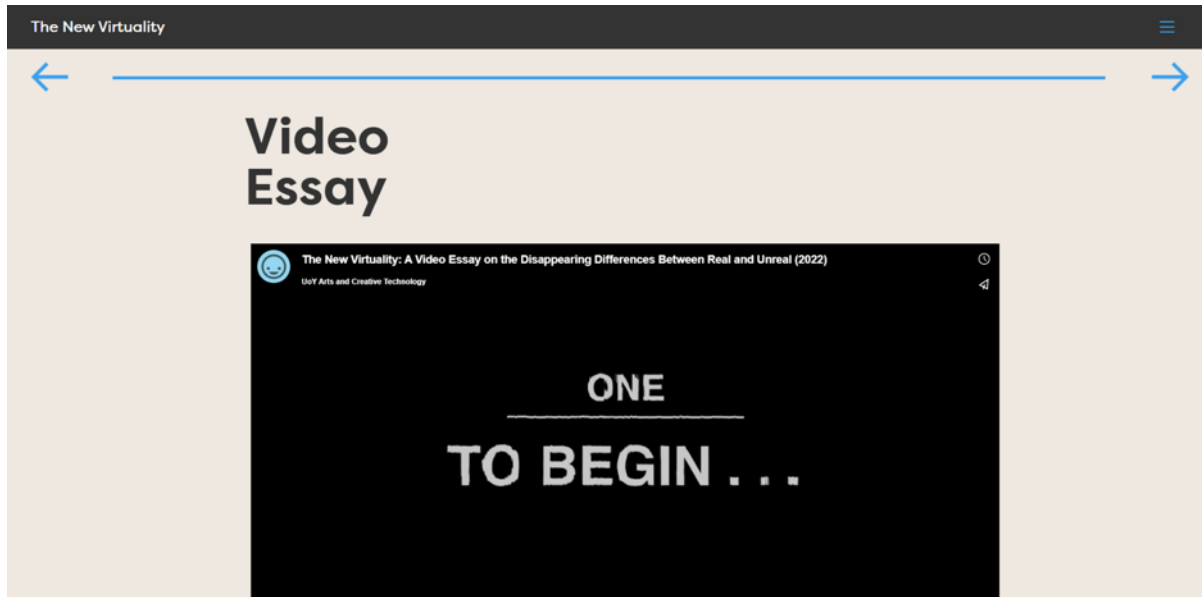


Fig 4. Screenshot of the project's video essay.

## Fiction

The third prong of the project is our employment of fiction as a warp to the weft of the academic text. Inspired by the “scientific fiction” work of Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan per their book *AI 2041*, we similarly wanted to use the dramatic elements of fiction, such as character and plot, to color and deliver additional life to the academic argument.

We thus intertwined a science fiction story into the project by first anchoring the story across two project elements. The first element is an interactive story written in the open-source Twine tool that sets the reader at a pivotal moment of choice between characters related to the protagonist. The second is an epilogue which explains the story’s premise of a physically ailing protagonist traversing virtual space with his futuristic carer.

Specifically leveraging the connected spaces of a website, we further constructed the fictional story through fragmented snippets interspersed amidst the academic text, signaled by red “portal” icons (see fig. 5a). When clicked, the portals raise text describing fictional scenes



between the protagonist and his carer (see fig. 5b). Each scene presents an issue of the protagonist's being in his virtual world, thus furnishing a fictional canvas on which to further interrogate and explore the question of mixed actual and virtual realities.

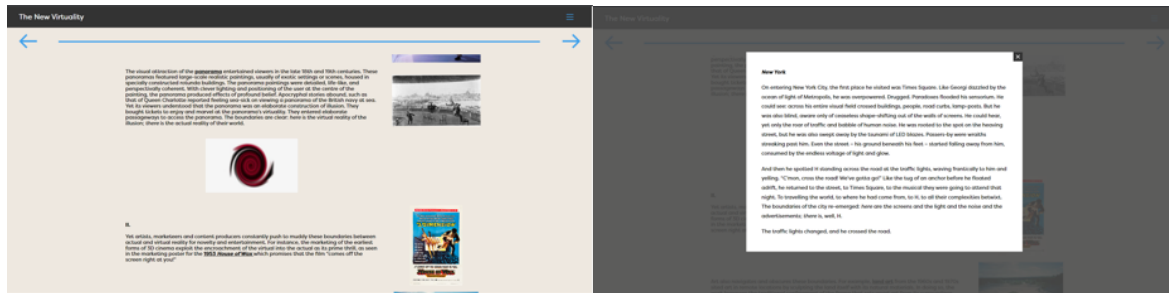


Fig 5a and 5b. The "red portal" icon (left) to bring up the fiction text (right).

## Project Aim and Design

The aim of this project is to examine the phenomenon of mixed realities as an environment of media that stands as codes for the larger entwinements or *blurs* between the anthropology of new beings.

We likewise designed different valences and modalities in the project in various ways to reflect this thematic content of blur and blend. Firstly, the project deliberately reflects mixed voices across academia and creative work, research and practice, text and image, nonfiction and imagination, active and interactive readership. These different voices set up the project as an unusual hybrid work along the lines of being a para-academic text as identified by Eileen Joy and Nicola Masciandaro in their panel discussion on being “the multivalent sense of something that fulfills and/or frustrates the academic from a position of intimate exteriority” (quoted in Boshears 179). Academic channels tend to be narrow, focusing on set methodologies and neutrality of discourse that do not usually countenance alternative valences. On the other hand,

fiction—even science fiction—springs out of imagination, speculation, and creative treatment. This project deliberately treads multiple paths between academic discourse, creative practice, and science fiction, blurring their distinctions to leverage the resulting disorder for added color, vibrancy and multiple valences from its images, video, and other creative elements. In its para-academic multivalences, the project’s platform itself thus reflects our argument of the radical blurring of realities.

Secondly, the project’s treatment of blurred realities also resonates in its interface design of connective webpages. Almost all academic websites are depositories of descriptive pages with hosted links to resources such as journal articles. Conversely, the website of “The New Virtuality” stands integrally to its argument. Its stitching together of text, fiction, images, interactive story, and video is itself a meta-reflection of its argument of mixed realities. Its solicitation of the user’s puzzling over and piecing together the different fragments of the website across its pages is our call to their action in similarly constructing their realities across the mix of actuality and virtuality. Not just a page of text, the webpage animates, is filled with movement, and promises connections and pathways. It is active between author and reader. It is a key, even almost self-reflective, vehicle of the blurrings at play in the project’s methodologies. It serves as an active agent in these convergences, and thereby also partakes in the blur.

Finally, the project’s design reflects blurs of different reading modes. Across various methodologies and presentation styles, it muddies the static with the moving, or text and still images with interactive story and video. In this sense, it also blurs passive reading with interactive co-authorship. In turn, the blur in these procedural ways converges two, if related, respective binary modes: practice and research; author and reader. Practice is action that is necessarily in the present: I do X; or I am doing X. On the other hand, research leans to action

from the past: I did X—read; consulted; gathered; interviewed; analyzed—and here are my findings and discussion. In both cases, the viewer or reader is passive as compared to the practitioner or researcher as active authors. In both cases, too, the text as an interface (Hookway) is irrelevant. It is an indifferent intermediary of merely transmitting information from author to reader.

The different modalities in the project blur these binaries. On one hand, we presented research in its past action and as text per convention. But we have also mixed in specific practices of more active readership such as scrolling through the website, shifting from image to text in their parallel spaces, jumping between academic text and fiction, selecting links or media to which the reader wishes to pay attention, and so on. Research and practice—past and present action—thus converge in this extended agency. By partaking in practice, the reader's role also blurs into that of an implicit author whereby they are able to formulate the path through which they navigate this work with a freedom that is otherwise usually very limited (one can only intelligibly read through a journal article in so many ways). Moreover, their agency as co-author in both physical and mental processes merges action and passivity. Their bodies are more actively at work, if only through fingers that type and wrist movements in maneuvering the computer mouse. Their imaginations are solicited in having to piece together the fiction world alongside the academic discourse, and in connecting images with text.

In these ways, the various elements of project design thus constitute part of our argument of discombobulation in the blurring of realities, setting up a different and little-seen, if at all, way of leading and presenting academic research. Through its multi-variegated approach of blurred modalities, it dissipates and discords the ecology and/or environment in which the academic

product is conceptualized, experienced, and mediatized. It calls into question academia's entire setup of knowledge, epistemology and, indeed, reality.

### **Project Argument**

In our project, we argue that this state of reality as so mixed between the virtual and the actual presents an epistemology of new combinations of realities through contemporary images. It calls for revised literacies with which to gain awareness of and reckon with today's most significant cultural, social, and political changes. In addressing visual media of mixed actual and virtual realities, the project's central argument is likewise also about blur.

The project begins this address through tracing a historical overview of virtuality—defined as “‘functionally or effectively but not formally’ of the same materiality as what [the image] represents” (Friedberg 11)—out of visual media that specifically blur boundaries between the image and its surroundings. This arc ranges from eighteenth-century panoramas to marketing practices to developments of film genre to considerations of contemporary technology such as Virtual Reality (VR).

Delving into this media archaeology enables a deeper understanding of media's blurred boundaries through its genealogy of media history and practice. On one level, the blur of realities resulting from disappearing image boundaries is not new. Visual media have always pushed the boundaries between the virtuality of images against the actuality of the viewer's environment. In this regard, there has been much work by film and media scholars on the virtuality of the image as against its actuality (Friedberg; Grau). Applied across various media from paintings and trompe l'œil to photography and cinema to VR and immersive environments, practices which muddied images against their referent are by no means new.

In another sense, the historical tracing also sharpens what *is* different—namely, an emerging coding of reality which requires new literacies. The new virtuality of blurred realities is no longer about questions of realism or illusion which had followed the advent of computer-generated imagery (CGI) or even deepfakes. They are about new technical codes and information which constitute such images, giving rise to revised conceptions of their ontology, anthropology, epistemology, literacy, time, and space. In particular, we extend understanding virtuality from one of representation to that of vacillation. Virtuality is now, rather, a complex dialogue that wheels across the virtual and the actual, signaling for the viewer beliefs and knowledge in realities and a regime of truth values for which there is no longer any conception of difference. Or, to take Saussure's ideas, "without positive terms" (Virno and Campbell). Reality thus has no positivity, but only relativity to the virtual and the actual in continuity and congruousness.

Taking on a contemporary flux point of blurred media boundaries, the project focuses its address of virtuality on virtual humans as the key current exemplar of mixed realities. Neither actual nor virtual, neither real nor unreal, virtual humans present their engagement as a condition of constant, almost volatile, vacillation between those binary poles. In these fluctuations, the difference between actual and virtual humans ultimately disappears. The simulacra collapse into the real, where reality and illusion no longer have their old semantic values as counters or opposites to each other. The user thus confronts a state of virtuality that is not quite virtual nor actual, nor an amalgamation of the two. Rather, it is a limbic space of vacillation.

In turn, that disappearance of difference also heralds the vanishing of moral space. As Baudrillard writes:

What was separated in the past is now everywhere merged; distance is abolished in all things: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and auditorium,

between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and its double. And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that nowhere—in art, morality, or politics—is there now any possibility of a moral judgement. (176)

Out of this loss of moral being also emerges a radical disorientation from the disappearance of difference, or the nullification of the act of distinguishing. In this discombobulation, the viewer's vacillations between virtual and actual realities in the new virtuality culminate with an almost heedless gluttony of the virtual. The eliding of difference in the new virtuality thus also paves the way for a black hole of representability that gives rise to a resulting hunger for images and virtual life. In a sense, this gluttony received an unexpected boost when various parts of the world largely retreated into virtual life under the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020–21. While these lockdowns have been mostly lifted, virtual working and living still continue today. With subdued yet sure determination, the virtual invades the actual as human activities and socializations shift into the former in rejection of the latter. The appetite for the virtual continues unabated. It likewise feeds the new virtuality and expands the ecology of the virtual in contemporary environments.

The new virtuality thus not only manifests as mixed realities. It also heralds intense discombobulations of definitions and truth values. From these radical shifts, new structures of power, capital and influence arise which need to be examined and understood. New opportunities need to be leveraged, and new perils countered. The new virtuality is a media ecology which sets up increasingly complex linkages between media, codes, expressions, consciousness, change, and history. These ideas revise the orientation of our truth values, identify potential moral voids, and ultimately impact how we may understand our world.

## Conclusion

The project's central idea is a new state of reality that is blurred between the virtual and the actual. In this treatment, the project also sets out the blur in audiovisual media to be the language of the future—the blur of images and bodies, of actual and virtual spaces, of information and beings. It articulates this theme in terms of both content and approach. Going forward, understanding also needs to give way to practice—how to deal and live with this discombobulation. That is the final blur: the blur between epistemology and practice, between ontology and action, between anthropology and research. We need to merge understanding into action.

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# Hashtagging, Duetting, Sound-linking: TikTok Gestures and Methods of (In)distinction

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## **Abstract**

My contribution investigates the features of hashtagging, duetting, and sound-linking on TikTok. By discussing the circulation of disinfectant memes in the wake of Trump's Coronavirus press briefing from April 23, 2020, it pursues two main objectives: The first objective is to address the specificity of TikTok as a multifaceted gestural assemblage by drawing on critical considerations of affect and social media. Starting from Vilém Flusser's notion of gestures, I move to the analysis of digital video material and its engaging characteristics. The second objective is oriented toward experimentation with the methodological potential of TikTok metadata—hashtags, post captions, duets, sounds, stickers, and engagement metrics—for meme research. Reflecting on a small set of #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant posts through a series of analytical visualizations, I address the ambiguous role that TikTok sharing plays in the composition of embodied memetic production. Both objectives invite a discussion of the extent to which memes challenge distinctions in the viral logic of repetition and networked mutation, feeding into a complex ensemble of attention, meaning, and (non)sense-generating social media.

**Keywords:** gesture; affect; video memes; methods; data; TikTok

## Introduction: On Studying TikTok Gestures

According to different thesaurus definitions, the term “gesture” implies a movement as a means of connective expression: “A movement usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude” (*Merriam-Webster*), gesture further stands for something that you do “to communicate a feeling or instruction” (*Macmillan Dictionary*). In the context of social networking sites, a gesture is both an attentional impulse and “an icon which represents a type of action you can select to share with others” (*Macmillan Dictionary*). How social media elements—visual, textual, and auditive—look and behave “should indicate if gestures can be performed on them” (*Material Design*). But what can we do to study the “gestural virality” (Bilem) of platforms such as TikTok? And under which conditions?

Vilém Flusser proposed in 1991 that, in addition to interpreting the meanings that gestures transport, we must account for the specificity of what gestures can do. In the study of gestural assemblages, he saw a phenomenological effort to “take *affect* by surprise” (*Gestures* 1) by exploring how—through gestures—moods become formalized into repeatable symbolic statements. Repetition, however, especially in its relation to affect, is never identical or straightforward. Rather than being merely instrumental, it involves a sense of mixed potentiality connected to a sociotechnical apparatus that gestures set into motion. The apparatus of TikTok sharing, as I will argue below, unfolds its engaging potential through gestures that challenge distinctions in the viral logic of repetition and networked mutation. Drawing on critical considerations of affect and social media (Sampson; Dean; Parikka; Chun; Paasonen), I suggest that methodological inquiry sensitive to this logic is central to exploring the circulation of embodied memetic content as contingent upon the platform's technical features and experiential environments.

Tracing this symbiotic relationship, this article engages with the gestural characteristics of video memes that on TikTok are said to follow the organizing principles of imitation (Zulli and Zulli) and templatability (Abidin; Abidin and Kaye). By discussing how these principles affected the circulation of disinfectant memes in the wake of Trump's Coronavirus press briefing from April 23, 2020, it offers an analysis of 1,078 posts published with #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant. With a methodology attuned to the specificity of TikTok-native digital objects, three sections reflect on the features of hashtagging, duetting, and sound-linking. Different visualization and analysis techniques will help to understand the “multifarious character” (Marres and Gerlitz 23) of these features within the sociotechnical composition of seemingly distinct memetic formations. With each new layer of interpretation, a new perspective on #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant memes will emerge, providing a multisituated account of how—through networked video sharing—words, music, and body images overlap.

### **TikTok-mediated Affect, Disinfectant Memes, and Methods of (In)distinction**

It is important to point out that this approach necessitates recognition of social media engagement as something that is about liveliness and polyvalent constitution rather than straightforward technical amplification (Marres and Gerlitz). User-generated content is co-produced by platforms that distribute it, which means that a clear separation of technicity and context is no longer feasible (Niederer; Rogers and Giorgi). Adaptive to the interface design provided by the platform, the recurring patterns of dance moves, body performances, and lip sync battles on TikTok enact complex scenarios of memeification by combining the features of editability, visibility, persistence, and association (Treem and Leonardi). Within this engaging formation, one feature does not simply replace another (Dean). They overlap, modifying preceding connections in a process through which *distinct platform artifacts*—such as hashtags,

sounds, stickers, effects, and likes—*become indistinct* in the flow of recommended videos and memetic riffing.

Posing the question of the extent to which platform experience can be rendered tangible through networked engagement, TikTok sharing is inextricably linked to affect modulation. By linking users' video performances through co-hashtags, editing features, and searchable sounds, TikTok's "affective affordances" (Geboers; Hautea et al.) activate unique formations of embodied memetic content. Understood in this vein, and following Jussi Parikka's helpful definition, an affect mediated through the gesture of sharing involves "multiple layers [. . .] across which social organization, visibility, and empowerment—but also data above all those things—flows" (65). Most of this data results from users engaging with platform features that enable complex multifaceted interaction in the front end. In the back end, affective impulses which intermesh in the flows of user-generated content translate into pre-structured data points and associated metadata (Gerlitz). The logic of connection these features entail is fuzzy. Affordances of the "effects tab" and "use this sound" button encourage immediate responses toward emerging trends and simultaneously provide a long-term basis for algorithmic manipulation of the affective environments in which memes circulate (Grandinetti and Bruinsma). On an infrastructural level, the very same affordances facilitate imitation as a means of creating traceable units of cultural information. However, as soon as a trend goes viral, both searchable effects and listed sounds turn into a messy cascade of audiovisual riffs that disturb the logic of source and adaptation. While allowing the platform to track engagement through distinct communicative functions, TikTok sharing therefore resists clear-cut categorizations. A multifaceted relational gesture, it blurs the moments of contact and capture in online social environments.

Understanding the role of affect in this gestural assemblage also requires accounting for the linkages of the body to the memetic aspect of the Internet (Bilem). A gesture never repeats without transforming the states of relations in which it becomes registered. For Flusser, it comes into force as “a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation” (*Gestures* 2). Not only, for example, does the “gesture of video” (*Gestures* 142–6) absorb movements of the video maker, but it also attempts to produce an event in which the maker participates. The “gesture of searching” (*Gestures* 147–61) changes the relationship between subject and object. The “gesture of listening to music” (*Gestures* 111–17) connects human bodies through acoustic vibrations. The gestures of “pressing buttons” and “tapping with the fingertips on the keys” blur the line between experience and expression even further: stemming from an apparatus that Flusser calls “calculate and compute” (*Into the Universe* 134–6), these gestures produce a universe of technical images, in which all events feed into high-speed feedback loops of image production and processing.

While Flusser’s considerations need to be further attuned to the specificity of media objects and events in question (De Rosa; Büscher and Horáková), they already pick up some of the characteristics that the gesture of sharing on TikTok entails. Partially as a result of global pandemic lockdowns, TikTok engagement reached its peak during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak when the platform made headlines as the most downloaded non-gaming app and as “one of the world’s biggest distractions” (Wells et al.). Along with other headlines promoting TikTok “as the perfect antidote to social isolation” (Haigney), music parodies and voice impressions emerged as characteristic vernaculars, with TikTokers garnering millions of views on their humorous portrayals of global leaders (Stratton). Imitation and irony are key to the affective transactions of

this kind, and memes circulating in response to topical events are no exception, especially when it comes to Trump.

During an April 22, 2020, White House Coronavirus press briefing, the then US President delivered his remarks on the medical use of light and disinfectants. In his speech that instantly went viral, he discussed the possibility of combatting the virus by injecting disinfectants into the human body. While public health organizations urged everyone not to follow Trump's suggestions, the ensuing long tail of clickbait headlines, outraged reactions, and memes, above all, caused backlash and distraction. On TikTok, lip-sync comedians duetting one another combined gestural humor with searchable sound templates, using Trump's characteristic voice tone to deliver a punchline. Lysol, Dettol, Clorox, and other household cleaners became trending hashtags along with #trumptini, #injectdisinfectant, #tidepodpresident, and #dontdrinkbleach. Soon enough, Twitter and other platforms blocked some of these trends due to the violation of the COVID-19 misinformation policy, leaving behind an erratic space of junk information and political satire (Culliford). The alternate memetic universe initiated by this exchange had a fragmented social media afterlife, resulting in somewhat restrained tactics of trend hijacking. In my interpretation of these tactics on TikTok, I focus less on the specific contents and more on the time-bound associations they provoked in relation to the event, highlighting "zones of indistinction" (Sampson) in the environments of social media circulation. By defining such zones through their imitative capacities, I draw on Tony Sampson's discussion of mimicry, adaptation, and alignment that constitute today's viral trends and memetic phenomena. Here, distinction and indistinction work hand in hand, activating mutable forms of engagement through collective appropriation of variously networked platform content.

Inspired by critical reflections on affect and social media, I then put forward (in)distinction as a multisituated method that recognizes how body images and gestures become entangled within TikTok's mediated settings. By engaging with videos attached to #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant through a series of synthetic data visualizations or "composite images" (Colombo), I reflect on a set of questions: Can we deploy co-occurrences of hashtags and other TikTok entities to explore how "imitation publics" (Zulli and Zulli) blend into platform-mediated communicative environments? How can we address less visible content formations which are becoming active through minor deviations in response to the events of peak intensity? And, specifically in relation to the embodied aspect of disinfectant memes, what happens at the edges of networks that amplify their engaging potential through gestures and sounds?

#### **#dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant: Cross-reading Co-hashtags**

In this analysis, I initially focused on two explicitly ironic, fairly nonsensical, and heavily moderated hashtags that emerged in the wake of Trump's Coronavirus press briefing on April 23, 2020—#dontdrinkbleach (2.4 million views) and #injectdisinfectant (1.9 million views). Assuming that related co-tagging practices would be more likely to intermesh than to polarize, I built a co-occurrence network that elevates divergences and alignments between #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant in three temporally bound zones. To explore the drifts of content circulating within these zones and to work around the problem of moderation, TikToks published with the main co-occurring hashtag #disinfectant in April and May 2020 were also included in the dataset. Deriving from a total of 1,078 curated posts, larger nodes of the network fragment in figure 1 represent the main shared co-hashtags. Smaller nodes represent contextual variations of more specific word collocations embedded in post captions. Edges represent the intensity of bonds along with the shifts in relations of association between different

memetic communities. The network they span highlights variability and fuzziness in users' repeated attempts to attune novel content to the short-lived virality of Trump's COVID-19 treatment speech, emphasizing the ephemeral concentration of attention around the event through its TikTok-specific reverberations.

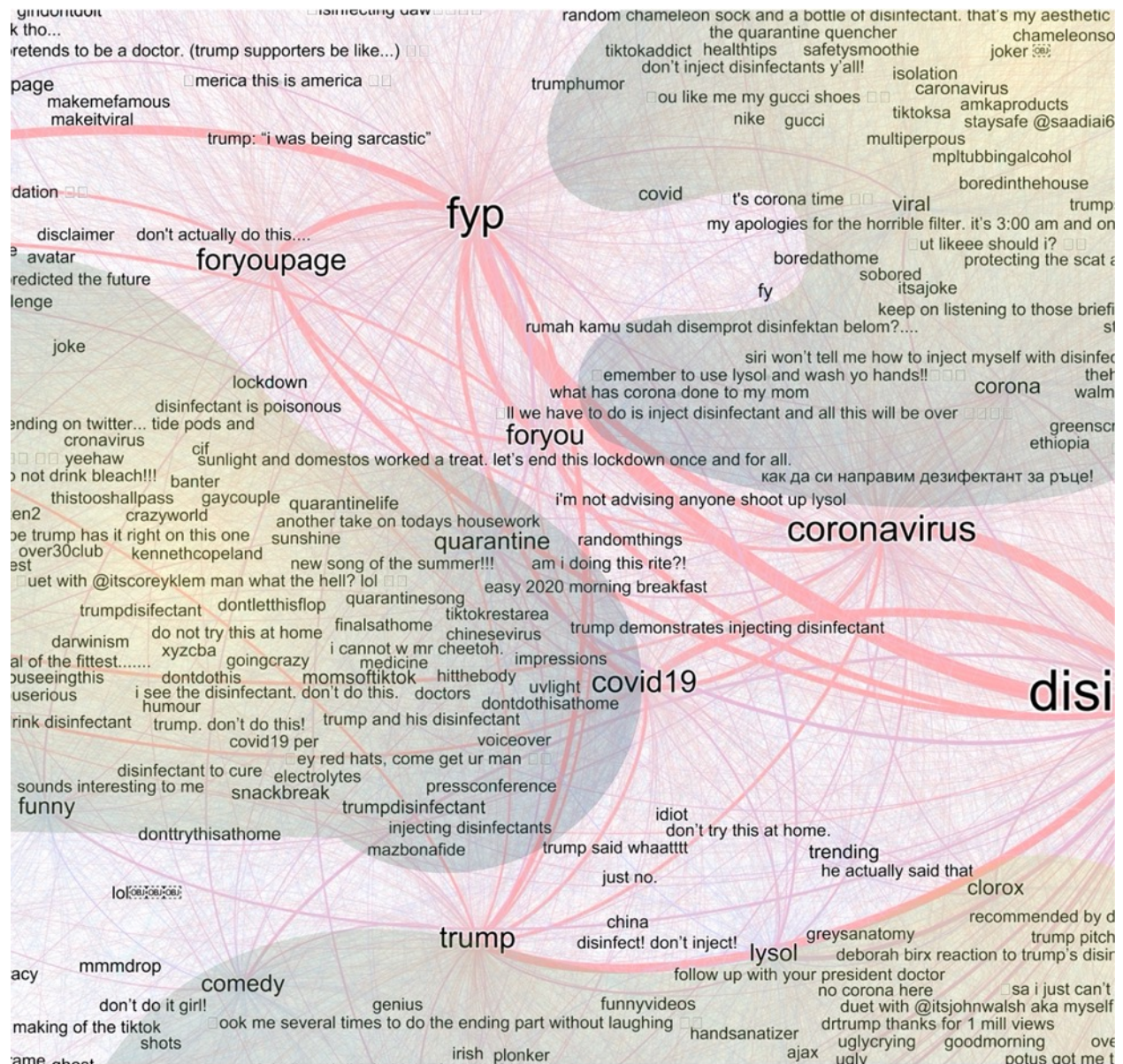


Fig 1. A fragment of TikTok co-occurrence network connecting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant with their main shared co-hashtags and specific post captions: smaller nodes represent situated associations deriving from post captions; bigger nodes with strong connections represent resonant co-hashtags such as #foryoupage, #trump, and #covid19. Extracted in May 2020 with TikTok scraper, visualized with Gephi.



As a relational approach interested in the memetic workings of TikTok sharing, a co-occurrence analysis of hashtags and post captions helps in understanding both user- and platform-driven dynamics of content circulation. By highlighting proximities and distances between the network elements, it elevates the contingency of viral events upon the logic of imitation and contextual play. Following Zizi Papacharissi, affective attunement through hashtags invites imitation without necessarily producing a sense of collectivity. Hashtag-distributed interactions organize individual posts into searchable units of platform experience, comprising “an organically developed pattern of impulses, restraints, and tonality” (321). The analysis of co-hashtag relations contextualized through more specific post captions, therefore, depends as much on their emergent temporality as on the platform used to access the issue. While common co-hashtags amplify the characteristic sense of overabundance and blurriness, post captions tend to be singular in their stance, facilitating affective alignments between personal experience and collective expression.

What is it then that connects #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant in the first place? On TikTok, every gesture involved in the process of memeification is attached to the mechanisms of visibility labor with the aid of TikTok’s algorithmic content feed also known as FYP or “For You Page” (Kaye et al.). Platform-native strategies of attention harvesting associated with the habit of tagging new contributions with #foryoupage, #foryou, and #fyp are closely interwoven with this page as a source of affective amplification (Schellewald). The act of posting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant with #fyp hashtags, therefore, partially derives from a communally informed belief in the miraculous performance of TikTok’s attentional infrastructures. A gesture that is more about “the showing of sharedness” (Frosh 123) rather than the actual promise of visibility, it explicates the dynamics through which hashtag publics gain

traction as they fight for space and intermesh. The resulting network, while operating through creative anticipations of viral success, may thus well inspire modes of engagement that go beyond vanity metrics (Rogers). Instead of providing a homogeneous view of imitation-driven virality, it allows for the articulation of competing sentiments that emerge as users share novel contributions and content formations develop density and texture.

Proportional to the number of posts in which #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant were used together with other hashtags, the central fragment of the network in figure 1 represents the range and impact of users' temporally bound engagement. Node size and the density of edges correspond with the varying degree of connection between three main co-hashtag formations revolving around #trump, #quarantine, and #coronavirus in April and May 2020 (for a detailed overview of each co-hashtag formation, see also fig. 2). The first cluster of associations with #trump, #comedy, and #disinfectant connects to how the trend of Trump impersonator videos, initially circulating within comedy related TikTok communities, has become identified as a source of value generation in the wake of the White House Coronavirus press briefing. Accompanied by the creation of gestural video memes reacting to Trump's comments, #lysol and #clorox inspired TikTokers to riff on the original speech, positioning disinfectants in absurd, but strategic and popularity-oriented ways.

The second cluster further explicates the engaging potentials of networked irony (Phillips and Milner). In the process of memeification, the gesture of mixing disinfectant cocktails has grown into a continuum of #quarantinelife jokes, suggesting to "follow up with the president doctor" through co-hashtags #quarantine, #funny, #lockdown, and #momsoftiktok warning

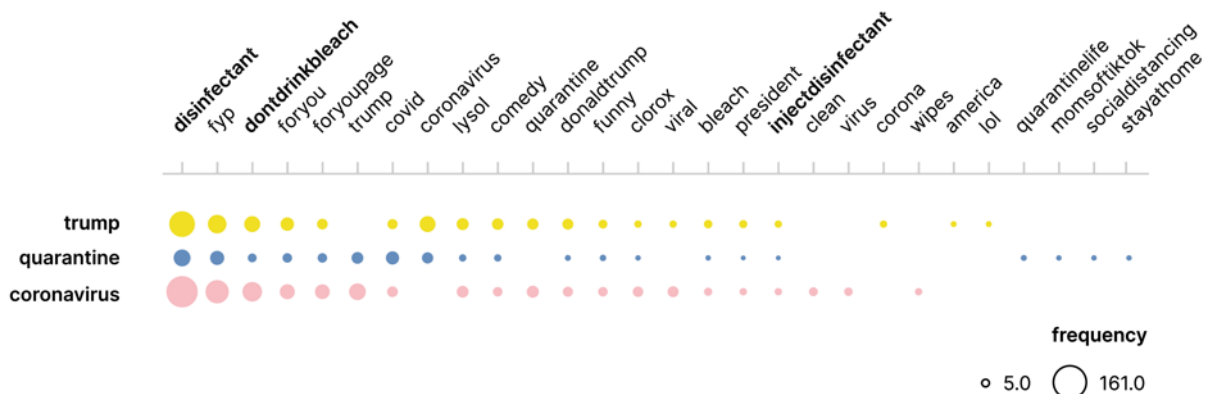


Fig 2. Top 20 co-hashtags used in combination with #trump, #quarantine, and #coronavirus. Size encodes the number of cooccurrences per co-hashtag (5<340). Made with RawGraphs.

#dontdrinkbleachkids. Similarly, hashtags used in the third cluster were turned into an additional attractor for tongue-in-cheek #coronavirus videos relating #dontdrinkbleach to #boredinthehouse—a viral TikTok song published by Detroit-based rapper Curtis Roach in March 2020 and connected to the broader network of concerns and interests emerging in the context of the pandemic (Kendall, “From Binge-Watching to Binge-Scrolling”). Revolving around playful post captions such as “siri won’t tell me how to inject myself with disinfectant” or “random chameleon sock and a bottle of disinfectant. That’s my aesthetic,” this last memetic scenario positions #disinfectant within the ambiguous realm of platform-facilitated boredom and distraction (Paasonen, *Dependent*).

The shifting affective registers, both restraining and intensifying, that such interactions emerge from encourage us to look at networks not as a method of trend detection but for the analysis of “happening content” (Marres and Gerlitz 40). TikTok hashtags, like other digital objects, do not work in isolation but as part of an increasingly blended system (Dean 2-4) of embodied engagement in league with moving images, stickers, effects, and sounds. Affect is a

key driver of social media circulation, and the formation of viral body image events on TikTok builds upon the recurrent moments of experiential intensification that indicate memetic power (Tanni). Exploring which memetic scenarios emerged in relation to #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant, the next sections focus on the confluences of gestures and movements that TikTok facilitates through its dynamic short-video format.

### **Networked Templatability: What Happens at the Edges?**

If TikTok sharing is a multimodal act that heavily relies on embodied performance, then which methods does it take to understand its main memetic currency—videos—as networked objects encouraging imitation? The extent to which hashtag co-occurrences can be repurposed for studying the affective appeal of memes or any other type of spreadable content depends on the willingness to acknowledge the dynamism of networked exchanges that are determined not by the main visible nodes but by what happens at the edges (Chun). As suggested above, such exchanges frustrate neat separations between bodies and social media environments, creating “porous self-other relations” and “zones of indistinction” (Sampson) in the referential dynamics of memetic events. Instead of demarcating which elements of the network were active in terms of their visibility, co-hashtag co-occurrences of #trump, #quarantine, and #coronavirus draw attention to these zones, highlighting networked templatability of the body as the main driving force of TikTok disinfectant memes.

In continuation of considerations suggesting that templatability on social media platforms “leads to specific aesthetic choices, ways of crafting content, and strategies of attention grabbing” (Abidin and Kaye 60; Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin), I explore the capacity of TikTok video sharing to steer itself toward networked imitation. To account for the dynamism of body movements and gestures repeating across a variety of #dontdrinkbleach and

#injectdisinfectant videos, I adapt a visualization technique known as “image stack” (Colombo; Bogers et al.).

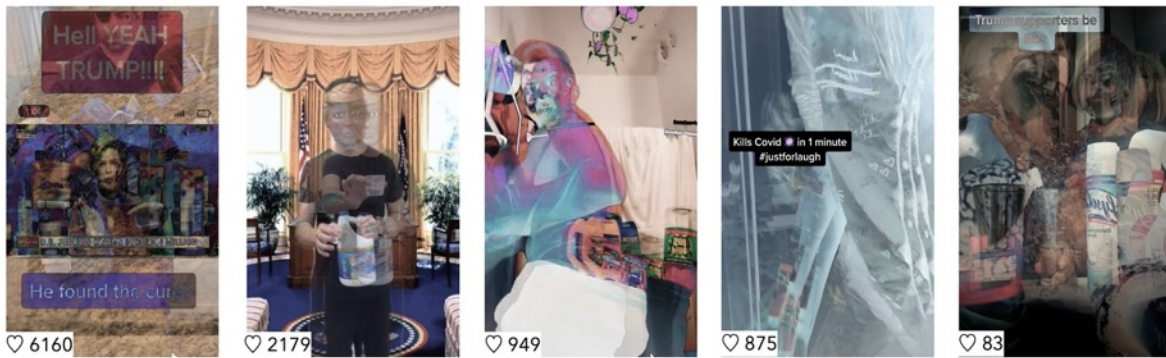
In figure 3, cross-hashtagged video memes that were first deconstructed into a series of static frames and then stacked back together into composite visual artifacts guide the process of interpretation. The images are blurred, and the settings show little detail. However, by prioritizing movement over singular deidentified images, the method allows researchers to explore the embodied component of TikTok sharing. Focusing on the templatability of gestures through combinations of #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant co-hashtags, one can explore inter-liked and cross-hashtagged choreographies of imitation. A stack, here, is first “a sort of computationally generated moodboard that can be used to synthesize textures, colors, and objects contained in a set of images” (Colombo 56). Second, it is a method of indistinction and “ethical fabrication” (Markham) that allows bricolage-style transfiguration of the original images. Third, it presents an opportunity to study embodiment as part of a multisensory universe of “collective mimicry” (Sampson 7; see also Goriunova), where each contribution is rendered into a social template to be copied and passed on. With each stacked image exposing a slightly different perspective on the same event through multimodal combinations of co-hashtags and stickers, the method offers a visual summary of contextually embedded and variously embodied meme action.

Fifteen video stacks arranged in the figure by their association with a selection of relevant co-hashtags reveal the dynamics of mutual adaptation in users’ #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant performances. In all three scenarios revolving around #trump #comedy, #quarantine #funny, and #coronavirus #viral, the centrality of the body is immediately evident. Almost every performance pretends to follow Trump’s absurd COVID-19 treatment instructions,

### #trump #comedy



### #quarantine #funny



### #coronavirus #viral

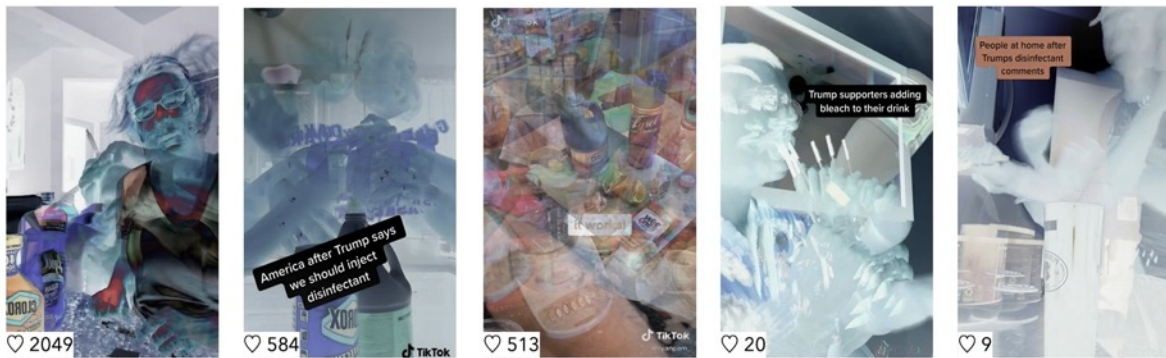


Fig 3. Fifteen video stacks for three co-hashtag pairs connecting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant presented in a grid and sorted according to like count. Visualized with ImageJ.

showing bodies engaged in receiving fake disinfectant injections, mixing Lysol cocktails, and mimicking drinking bleach. What these human-nonhuman relations capture are staged body image events that feed into a (counter)imitative formation of content connecting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant. The gestures and movements of the bodies (human and nonhuman) that these composite images have in common raise questions concerning the increasing disintegration of the TikTok-mediated self. Prompted into action through imitation and visualized in a grid to enable a comparative reading, the resultant gestural juxtaposition elevates the memetic nature of the videos as well as their hashtag-driven associations that connect performing bodies into one networked expressive formation.

A feeling of shared nonsense these videos generate becomes intensified not only through video stickers mocking Trump supporters but also through the feature of duet. Duetting on TikTok affords the capacity to activate templatable forms of embodiment and video storytelling. Unlike the stitch, which can incorporate up to five seconds of someone else's content in a new video sequence, duets allow for a juxtaposition of two videos playing next to one another at the same time, often for purposes of attention hijacking. As a platform-embedded means of "memetic association" (Treem and Leonardi; Hautea et al.), the feature of duet helps to conceptualize networked templatability in terms of relational play. While thriving on repeatable gestures—as indicated by two examples featuring most liked #trump and #comedy videos in figure 4—it simultaneously remains open to counterimitation. Here, indeed, "the sense of self comes into contagious relation with others to such a degree of intensity that [it] potentially collapses" (Sampson 71), disturbing the separation of mutually reinforcing memetic scenarios.



Fig 4. Duets with two most liked #trump and #comedy videos, visualized as stacks or layers of static video frames superimposed one upon another. Visualized with ImageJ.

For some, the self-recorded act of mixing disinfectant cocktails or impersonating Trump might have been a strategic investment into TikTok’s attention economy, while for others it might be just fun. Some would mime the most ridiculous scenarios of disinfection or ironize about the best cleaning spray flavors out of boredom; others might remember the dangerous Tide Pod challenge that went viral in 2018 encouraging teenagers to film themselves while they attempt to eat detergent (Ritschel). Some would add text stickers to their videos to specify that “adding bleach to their drinks” is precisely “what Trump supporters be like.” Others would indicate irony by duetting famous female comedian and Trump impersonator Sarah Cooper or simply use the Oval Office background effect to give a more elaborate acting performance. Regardless of motivations, however, drastic fluctuations in video metrics represented through the number of likes suggest that the initial visibility of disinfectant memes was rather of a momentary kind. While strategically cross-hashtagged TikToks full of disinfectant bottles, performing bodies, and flashy effects were indeed intended for viral circulation, only several performances managed to gain traction.



## What Resonates? From Hashtags to Sounds

Along with questions of interpretability it gives rise to, TikTok video-sharing comes with a range of possibilities for navigation. Because of the “multifarious character” (Marres and Gerlitz 23) of platform artifacts, different modalities of sharing may serve to provide different perspectives on the same online event in different platform settings. Different settings also have different logics of alignment: hashtag combinations, for example, activate a variety of associations, the purposes of which may not always be clearly distinguished as they transform from one context of appropriation to another. On TikTok, what hashtags make visible, at the same time, might be less prominent when accessed through sounds and vice versa. In their role as mediators of affect, hashtags and sounds can turn into a source of mutual amplification or may remain disengaged even when united through technical means. The resultant experiential formations can, following Susanna Paasonen, be conceptualized as instances of networked resonance, “the intensities of which grow, linger, and fade away at varying speeds as user attention and interest perpetually circulates, moves, shifts, and relocates” (“Resonant Networks” 60).

Exploring these associations, as in figure 5, opens a relational perspective on such intensities. The thickness of edges and the size of nodes in the diagram represent the extent to which hashtags and sounds are attuned to one another.

The polyvocal “original sound” used in 605 out of 1,078 posts comprises the main scene of contestation through users’ performances both mimicking Trump’s voice and randomly commenting on the event. Event-specific listed sounds such as “Bleach boys,” “Inject the disinfectant,” or “Trump disinfectant” allow researchers to locate competing sentiments that emerged in response to Trump’s speech through practices of vernacular aural parody (Matamoros-Fernández et al.). Titles also related to other contexts like “Monkeys Spinning

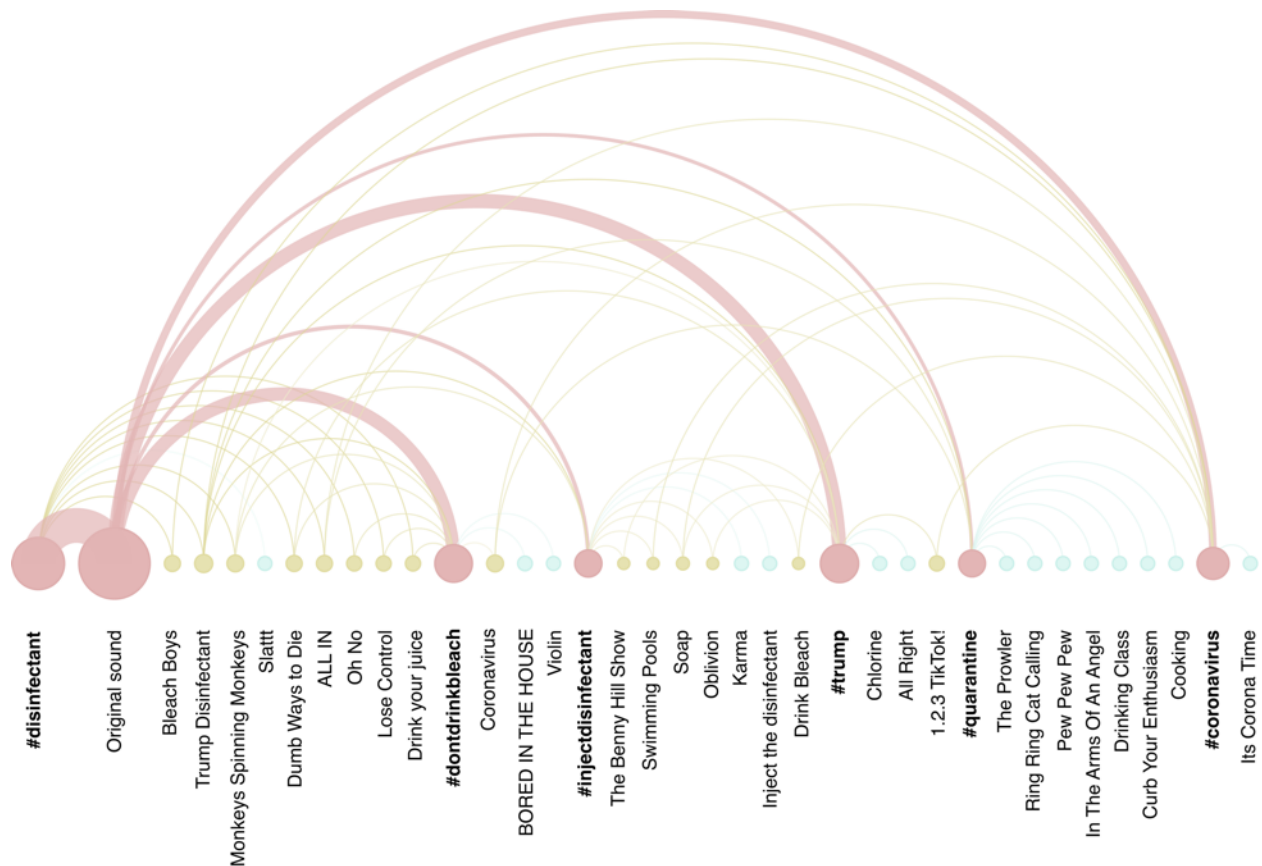


Fig 5. A network of unique and shared sounds attuned to five selected hashtags. Flow size represents the number of times a hashtag appears together with a given sound ( $2 < 406$ ). Made with RawGraphs.

Monkeys” and popular pandemic tunes such as “Bored in the house” or “Corona virus” point to an expanded environment of memeification with some sounds being shared and some being unique to specific co-hashtags. By relying on the networkedness (Niederer) of hashtags and sounds, the clustering technique encourages a multilayered interpretation of TikTok engagement that permits affective attunement through various forms of expression.

A sound attuned to a specific TikTok trend may therefore add a new trajectory to a formation of content that was previously shaped by other means, creating a shift in relations of relevance and association. With everyday practices of audio-remix available in the “use this sound” feature, the “aural turn” (Abidin and Kaye) of TikTok plays out both on the

infrastructural level that encourages scale and on the basis of social micro-events that involve drift and displacement. Even though less visible in terms of metrics, the latter, more flexible foundation is central in terms of understanding mundane memetic exchanges resembling the vernacular languages of oral cultures (Phillips and Milner; Tutters). Premised on repetition and contextual variation, TikTok-mediated affect is contained in neither of these dimensions but aggregates into blended and partially contested amalgamations thereof. Multimodal in that it augments dynamic textual, visual, embodied, and aural characteristics, it activates ambiguous forms of alignment driven by simultaneous acts of networked sharing.

A focused exploration of TikTok-native expressive micro-formations can thus be performed by grouping sounds in relation to associated co-hashtags and video content. Such an approach focuses on the engaging logic according to which practices of video-sharing operate as part of platform infrastructures and in turn creatively repurpose these infrastructures for various affective ends. Figure 6 draws attention to the centrality of music in users' video creation and sharing practices. The method of montage—originally developed by Lev Manovich—draws together the sequential narrative of cross-hashtagged video performances and the spatial narrative of assembling these performances through sound.

The sequential narrative translates into a series of movements, facial expressions, and gestures displayed side by side in a montage of video frames. The spatial narrative revealing these movements comes to the fore in the juxtaposition of “Bored in the house” sound and its semantic neighborhoods demarcated through #dontdrinkbleach co-hashtags. Here, the gesture of sharing is rendered analyzable as a passage between the affective space of Curtis Roach's viral tune and the temporally bound formation of #dontdrinkbleach humor, tapping into the ordinary

## ♪ **BORED IN THE HOUSE** by Curtis Roach

#boredindahouse #quarantinelifelife #challenge #dontdrinkbleach



#boredinthehouse #dontdrinkbleach #itsfake #fyp



Fig 6. A montage of video frames extracted from two TikTok videos connected through #dontdrinkbleach and “Bored in the house,” visualized with ImageJ. The figure displays de-identified sequences of shots side by side. Play count ranges between 169 and 359, and like count ranges between 10 and 16.

aesthetic of home video footage. “Bored in the House” was selected based on its high popularity within the soundscape of pandemic memes, generating hundreds of thousands of posts as a sound and later also as a hashtag. In a content formation assembled through #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant, however, its fleeting appearance highlights users’ vernacular attempts to re-attune a trend to new engagement venues—a practice that might amplify one memetic movement and dilute another (Bainotti et al.).

As a form of reciprocal trend attunement, #dontdrinkbleach and “Bored in the House” involve imitative practices linking the storyboards of the videos to popular TikTok challenges. Connected via popular co-hashtags, the videos draw together engaging dynamics which, while aiming at further amplification through #fyp, shift our attention toward minor resonances of quarantine-related boredom and (non)sense-making. Reminiscent of Vine clips depicting users in domestic settings, the sequences of shots that show bodies engaged in internet browsing, balancing objects, and cutting hair highlight gestures as key sites of affective modulation fostered by participatory networks of social media (Kendall, “(Not) Doing It”). The shots

depicting the same bodies mimicking drinking bleach attach “Bored in the House” to the viral formation of Trump disinfectant jokes, feeding the mundane experience of boredom into a larger stream of content competing for likes, views, and comments. Indicative of a long tail of posts attuned to the viral song, the gesture of sharing employed in this affective formation is volatile in its impact with some content that gets picked up by many in one affective constellation—quarantine boredom—and yet remains relatively unnoticed when entering concurrent venues of unfolding events—#dontdrinkbleach.

### **What Else Can We Do to Study Gestures?**

The ambiguous role of hashtagging, duetting, and sound-linking in this gestural assemblage can be understood in terms of non-linear passages or feedback loops (Flusser, *Into the Universe*) that may both intensify and diminish the engaging potential of an event in question. As platform-mediated networks of capture and user practices become increasingly integrated, the gesture of sharing, according to Flusser, leads us to “a set of variations of chance events, namely, accidents, coincidences, mishaps, and occurrences” (*Gestures* 116). Oscillating between moments of peak intensity and habitual encounters, such passages produce blurred articulations of shared experience by moving from one state of mediation to another. Considered in this vein, TikTok gestures need to be further explored in their capacity to activate mutable relations of momentary impact and contagious intensity that resist being separated into distinct categories.

What these relations may allow us to study is the extent to which memetic formations connected through TikTok’s various features—hashtags, captions, sounds, effects, stickers, and duets—activate imitation as a force that attempts to “raise memes to the level of platform infrastructure” (Zulli and Zulli 5). The workings of (in)distinction here address the ways in which memes reverberate, resonate, and intermingle, competing for views and likes in constant

anticipation of novel adaptations. As objects of circulation that become active through repeated acts of sharing, memes generate value in response to events of peak intensity. By stimulating engagement in real-time, such events enable dynamic networks of content where, as Wendy Chun puts it, each variation “implies a potential interaction based on repeated past interactions” (52). On the one hand, this engaging temporality highlights the immediacy at which user interactions are organized in relation to unfolding events. On the other hand, spreadable formations of memetic content necessarily merge instances of heightened impact with more banal encounters where multilayered, affect-laden messages become captured as vernacular gestures and data-intensive practices.<sup>1</sup>

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# Blurriness in Media Art Archiving Where Theory Encounters Practice, the Archive of Digital Art (ADA)<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Due to its border-transgressing, fast-paced nature, and recalcitrance for clear-cut characterizations, media art has occupied the minds of art researchers, theorists, and archivists for many years. Today, particularly regarding questions of its documentation, there is a multitude of positions, approaches, and concepts produced in different contexts—academic, institutional, or from within the art scene itself. Of course, this vivid discourse signals the importance of the art form. Nevertheless, one could wonder if this circumstance adds to the field’s elusiveness and how it affects the hands-on activity of archiving. Based on our work with the online platform Archive of Digital Art (ADA), we want to share our practical experiences of media art archiving in the digital realm and interweave it with some theoretical considerations. Is there any space for blurriness? And if so, is it a daunting or a productive trait? Naturally, we are advocating for the latter... but it could also be a matter of perspective.

**Keywords:** archives; media art; digital humanities; digital archiving; archive theory; media art theory; image analysis

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It has been mentioned on numerous accounts that the field of media art holds a special position compared to traditional art forms. Some of the reasons include that it is usually referred to for its process orientation, employment of manifold techniques, materials, and strategies from a variety of disciplines and knowledge bases, or its fast-paced nature, which seems inherent in light of rapid technological developments and their equally fast incorporation in the artistic practices. Hence, characterizations often emphasize its elusiveness to clear-cut definition, e.g., describing it as “transient” or even “ontologically exponentially complex” (Ernst, *Digital Memory* 90; Saba 101).

Perhaps then, it seems fair to speak of a certain “blurriness” immanent to the domain of media art, a thought we want to elaborate in this paper. Our aim is to see if and how this “blurriness” translates into our work of digitally archiving this art form on the platform Archive of Digital Art (ADA, [www.digitalartarchive.at](http://www.digitalartarchive.at)). Therefore, in this section, we will look at two examples to illustrate why media art is so hard to pin down and discuss some theoretical viewpoints that problematize archiving this art of our time. In the second section, we will present ADA and its core idea of collaborative archiving, an approach already emanating from the intricacies of the media art field, its blurriness if you will, e.g., its diverse and dispersed community that is nevertheless highly interconnected. The third segment presents important tools to navigate and analyze the archive content, namely the Bridge Thesaurus and the viewing application Light Box. Stemming from previous projects they are the fundament for the next steps to further engage archive visitors. Before concluding on the role of blurriness for our practical work, we will present our current ideas on digital archiving in the section “Toward Playfulness.” For now, let’s continue with a few more words on blurriness in media art (archiving).

Seeing as today we hold efficiency in high regard, blurriness could be mistaken as undesirable, something that needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible. While this is surely an oversimplification, particularly with respect to media art, quite the opposite might hold true. In fact, one could argue that it is its most captivating feature, allowing for the right amount of nimbleness and flexibility to transgress boundaries when and wherever necessary. Isn't this an eminently suitable quality fitting to the increasing complexity of our time, which constantly calls for transdisciplinary approaches to explore new paths?

There is sufficient evidence of the diversity in media art. However, it is always helpful to establish examples, which can be brought up throughout the text to illustrate our points. For instance, artists like Adam Harvey or the collective *Forensic Architecture* blur the lines between the categories of art, research, activism, and journalism in their modus operandi. Works like *VFRAME* (2017–ongoing), a project that develops state-of-the-art computer vision tools for human rights research and conflict zone monitoring, are not only intrinsically procedural but appear in vastly different contexts such as art exhibitions and specific applications for detecting war crimes, thereby presenting themselves as investigative instruments that are meant to be used and as art objects alike. *Forensic Architecture* is an interdisciplinary team of architects, designers, artists, engineers, journalists, filmmakers, software developers, and other professionals that investigates armed conflicts, environmental destruction, or abuse of state power; their results are also frequently conveyed in art shows. Both cases depict how previous borders among different areas of expertise are eroding. Indeed, it is easy to imagine somebody questioning whether this is art at all or at least asserting that it should instead be subsumed under

research, activism, or journalism. Nevertheless, the fact is, they are widely recognized, especially in the media art sphere, where they each received distinguished awards.<sup>2</sup>

If the “blurriness” of media art—understood as its ephemerality and eclecticism of influences, methods, materials, and wide range of interests—already makes it tough to delineate in a straightforward way, it can be no surprise that it expands further into some major questions about its preservation for future generations. What does it entail to properly preserve a process-driven, modular, and materially as well as technologically diverse art form? What are adequate tools, methods, and intellectual foundations? The limitations of traditional online and offline archiving strategies in this respect have been mentioned on several occasions and often underline concerns about a reduction in loss of meaning or the general danger of losing culturally significant artworks because of missing resources and appropriate standards (Saba 102; Grau, “Our Digital Culture” 40). Although physical and digital archiving of media art share a couple of issues, there are also important distinctions between them, first and foremost that the former also deals with maintaining material objects and their functionality. Here, we primarily focus on implications, possibilities, and hands-on practices of the latter.

A frequent matter of discussion is the notion of originality in artworks, or rather the continuing disassembly thereof. Granted, this debate has been going on for some time and has gained a lot of traction since Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935). Nevertheless, it reaches another level in the digital context, where originality is regularly obscured, for example, when proclaiming the “final abandonment of the idea of originality in artistic work, since every digitalization process gradually undermines the presence of the source” (Saba 105). In contrast, Hal Foster adds, for consideration, that—

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<sup>2</sup> *Forensic Architecture* and *VFRAME* both won the prestigious Prix Ars Electronica in 2021 and 2019, respectively.

along the lines of André Malraux, who was in contact with Benjamin at the time of writing—reproduction can also “locate” and “construct” originality, rather than only disintegrating it (91). Maybe one should be careful of abandoning originality just yet, seeing how recent philosophy, namely Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), starts placing an emphasis on the integrity of objects again, also paying explicit attention to aesthetics and works of art (Harman, *Art + Objects*). Far from taking a firm stance on one side or the other, we contend that this tension is a very productive substrate for novel perspectives. For blurriness to occur there have to be (at least) two extremes, in this case the opposing conceptualizations of originality in terms of realism and postmodernism. It originates in between the neatly expressed models of thought, there they start to melt, there they become moldable and allow for creativity. OOO is an interesting case as they position (art) objects in between realism and postmodernism by tackling ontological premises.

Another problem, which subverts the finitude of media art pieces and raises serious ramifications for their preservation, is the increasing subordination of artworks to context and process. This typically involves stressing the dynamics of meaning based on situations on the one hand and the procedural openness as a result of constant physical or digital transformations on the other (Saba 104–7; Grau et al., “Documenting Media Art” 436). Those are undeniably good arguments but potentially traumatic for archivists; if it is unclear when or where artworks end, it makes the decision about what should be archived to reflect the (unknown) whole notoriously difficult. The above-mentioned examples illustrate the dilemma: What exactly should be archived in the case of *VFRAME*? Only the core idea of using advanced commercial machine learning technologies to uncover human rights violations? Or every single version of the ongoing project, from a tool for film analysis to monitor online content during the Syrian civil war, to detecting a particular cluster munition in the Ukraine war? Or the program codes?



What about information on the intricate and ever-advancing methods they employ or about the context of the conflict they were developed for? Of course, similar questions apply to *Forensic Architecture* and other works of media art. With context and process in the foreground, they are no longer seen as discrete entities in space and time but as enmeshed in the universal relation of things. Unfortunately, figuring out the needs for archiving becomes infinitely harder then.

In addition, the language to describe and categorize artworks in the field is remarkably fluid; falling back on established vocabulary for art like the Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) is only a partial option. Once more, the transitory character of media art, its trait of curiosity for different knowledge forms and up-to-datedness as to the latest societal developments and technical inventions, is a considerable cause that contributes to the “dynamic terminology” and constant “proliferation of terms” (Grau et al., “Documenting Media Art” 436; Saba 106–7).

### **The Archive of Digital Art (ADA) and a Story of Gains and Losses in Media Art Archiving**

Founded in 1999, the Archive of Digital Art (ADA) is one of the pioneering web platforms for the documentation of media art, and it is still operating and being developed (see fig. 1). During its 23 years a considerable number of researchers, artists, scholars, and affiliates contributed to its evolution, either devoting themselves to its infrastructural side by developing new features and reshaping its design, etc., or by adding to the content side of the database.<sup>3</sup> In a way, its vivid history mirrors some of the topics of archiving media art. As the platform itself grows organically over time, certain parts can become blurry, especially for members outside of the editorial team. In an intriguing undertaking, our technician, much like a media archeologist, uncovered the page’s former graphical appearances as well as the technologies applied in the

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<sup>3</sup> We sincerely thank all the colleagues who put their efforts into the evolution of the Archive of Digital Art.

past. Not without a sense of irony, the remaining uncertainty was: Can the archivers archive the archive comprehensively? What other stages of the platform's evolution could be brought to attention again? This manner of questioning raises awareness that on top of all its intricacies and shifting needs, ADA very much underlies the rapid transitions of technological standards itself. Keeping up is a big task and requires many skill sets, from technicians to designers to data analysts to archivists. In this multidisciplinary, dynamic, contextual, and procedural nature, media art strikingly resembles its archiving. But the more significant implication here is that viewing these characteristics from a certain angle, the notion of loss will always be predominant in (media) art preservation. This sort of critical inquiry sometimes serves its purpose when looking for certain answers, e.g., when looking for biases. But it can be a dark, exhausting kind of blurriness. Instead, we also want to underpin a kinder, lighter, more playful blurriness, if you will, one that leans on what can be gained rather than what could be lost. In the case of ADA, how much the project has evolved and gained since its initiation is clearly visible.

One main strategy of the archive is the attention to cultivating a collective documenting space for a community as rich as the art form itself. Today, the site lists events of about 900 media art institutions, providing an overview of past and present activities for the scene. Moreover, the archive encompasses over 4,000 artworks, more than 10,000 digital documents, and approximately 1,000 artists, as well as scholars who actively participate in the growth and vibrancy of the platform. Since the media art world is relatively decentralized—produced in many countries but coming together only for a handful of big festivals, e.g., Ars Electronica, or in a few other exhibition settings—media art can't rely on a dense network of institutions for preservation as for other fine arts. Hence, to reach a more comprehensive level of documentation, accessibility to the database is a key condition, which ADA ensures by allowing

artists and scholars to upload their own information. However, as a quality measurement, a gatekeeping policy requires them to have at least five exhibitions or published articles.



Fig 1. *Archive of Digital Art (ADA)*, new front page in a minimalistic design (under development). © Center for Image Science, University for Continuing Education Krems.

In a way this approach reflects and creatively reacts to the blurriness of the media art sphere, especially if you consider the application of a fairly new technology to document a fairly new and diverse field—collectively—back in 1999. This approach also has implications for the previously mentioned issues. So, let's start with the openness of media art rooted in its processuality and context dependence, making it elusive for documentation. To complicate things, there is a widespread view that, basically, the archive is a social place determined by historical and institutional power relations; in other words, archiving is never a neutral act (Ricoeur 167; Foucault 129). So, put bluntly, the threats of misrepresentation linger on both

sides: within the art and the archive. We certainly can't get around the fact that there is an administered framework behind ADA. It is simply necessary for the required consistency and quality of a database used in scientific and artistic contexts. Still, the overall aim is to facilitate access for people and also equip them with a considerable amount of freedom wherever possible. For instance, compared to traditional archives, where professionals individually select additions, the gatekeeping guideline is nonetheless an acceptable threshold for contributors and fits the globally dispersed structure of artists and scholars in the field. Additionally, normal visitors who are not community members can explore the database independently and are not subjected to the usual tight set of rules of physical archives that can create a barrier. Another example is the entry mask for uploaders; documents representing artists and scholars are predefined based on the concept of "expanded documentation" (Grau, "For an Expanded Concept" 2–15). They include a personal profile with biographical and bibliographical information, awards, inventions, statements, events, exhibitions, works, and publications. Artworks are presented on individual pages with a description, graphic images, video documents, sound files, schematics, technical data, references, literature, and information about institutions and copyright. Although there are defined input sections, artists have ample room to individualize their content. This means that it is up to the artists to decide how the artwork should be documented, e.g., which materials—images, sketches, articles, technical plans, etc.—are fundamental to its presentation, and whether, returning to *VFRAME*, the project should be featured either as one entry, or many entries for each of the artwork's versions.

Last but not least, contributors can also choose from a controlled keyword system to tag their work accordingly. These and other factors on ADA sum up to an innovative and appropriate model for archiving media art in our interconnected twenty-first century, making it a combined

effort of invested people. They blur the image of classic preservation, instead replacing it with a more democratic, collaborative, and procedural practice. However, it must be stressed again that an administrative body is in the background. Hence, balancing a wide degree of autonomy for users, our valuable external archivers, and the underlying architecture to keep the data coherent is one of the critical challenges for the editorial team. The archive is indeed largely a social place, but with ADA, the intention is to shake the institutional confines and open it to the community as far as possible. In this way, context and processuality are extended to the act of archiving and the representation of artworks becomes a shared responsibility.

But let us turn to the matter of originality, an idea that, as mentioned before, is frequently abandoned due to the impact of reproduction techniques, especially in the digital age. Together with the vagueness of media art and the systemic impossibility for archiving institutions to be unbiased, it seems the discourse revolves heavily around the concept of loss, emphasizing the gap integral to the realm of preservation. While this line of thought indubitably brings relevant facets to the table, the attention to what can be gained might be just as beneficial. Without reaching a conclusion, Hal Foster asks if the archival relation allowed by electronic information shatters both tradition and aura of artworks or, speaking in terms of Malraux, permits the fostering of ever more “stylistic affinities” and “artistic values” (93). We have no answer either, whether reproduction and digitalization increase or diminish the relevance of originality. The rising popularity and visitor records of museums may suggest the former.<sup>4</sup> But except for digital-born artworks, ADA is not in the business of preserving originals. Despite that, every entry to the database can be considered a sovereign yet potentially extensible digital object. Thus, if an artist

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<sup>4</sup> The popularity of museums was rising before COVID-19; now they seem to bounce back fairly well (“Popularity of Museums”; da Silva).

decides to edit an entry, it would still go back to being a self-contained object once they are finished.<sup>5</sup> This subtle shift to the “open finitude” of objects gives less weight to the insufficiencies in media art archiving, which direct the attention to achieve the unachievable by trying to grip what slips but opens up, with a kind of playfulness and curiosity, what the possibilities of this technological frame are and how these finite objects can be extended and (re)combined for exploration. In short, we concentrate less on problematizing the completeness of archived objects but ask what can be gained with them in the digital setting. Again, highlighting the loss is also an indispensable, valid angle when thinking about archiving standards for media art. It is likewise a reality that media artworks are lost because of a lack of funding and institutional hurdles (Grau, “Our Digital Culture” 40–2). But the question of what can be gained is equally essential for our work with ADA.

Corresponding to the suggested playfulness in the digital dimension, Wolfgang Ernst sees the electronic archive as “interactive,” “time-critical to user feedback,” and defined by “generative agency,” noting further that the “traditional classificatory indexing (by metadata) is replaced by dynamic (though still rule-governed, protocol-governed) sorting” (“The Archive as Metaphor” 50). We could not agree more. In the case of ADA, the blurry part that sparks experimentation is twofold: firstly, how we can advance the empowerment of members while being transparent about governing rules and protocols. The last part is vital as there are abundant bad examples in the social media environment. And secondly, how we can improve users'

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<sup>5</sup> This understanding of an object is inspired by Graham Harman (OOO). In his view objects are constantly neglected due to “under- or overmining,” meaning they are either reduced downwards to their components (e.g., particles) or upwards to relations (e.g., networks). He argues for the autonomy of objects, which interact based on their qualities (*Speculative Realism* 91–122). In this sense, the digital representation of an artwork is independent from the artwork; as autonomous objects, they nevertheless interact.

engagement with the documented material, or more precisely, what applications and modes of browsing through the archive are advantageous to support creativity.

### **First Step to Interaction: Bridge Thesaurus and Light Box**

Strengthening the communal sense and promoting interexchange on the database has been paramount for previous project teams, a spirit that is crucial for us to sustain, too. With this aim in mind, an array of functions has been introduced to the platform in the past, e.g., several Web 2.0 features like personal messaging, allowing for easy communication among members or the possibility of following the recent activities of other people. Also, the latest news and uploads are openly visible to the community. But two of the most significant steps in the endeavor to transform ADA into an interactive archive were the implementations of the first versions of the Bridge Thesaurus and Light Box from 2012 to 2016. They are both focal points for our current plans to investigate playfulness in a digital archiving environment, extract meaningful knowledge from existing data, and develop helpful tools to delve into the growing content on the website.

Arranged in four top hierarchies—“aesthetics,” “subject,” “genre,” and “technology”—the controlled vocabulary of the Bridge Thesaurus offers around 600 keywords for contributors to index their works with the matching linguistic descriptors. Being precise in this process improves specificity, findability, and exactness of the general categorization scheme. Moreover, it adds meaningful meta information for researchers, for example, when looking for artworks that are similar in style, use of technology, etc. Nonetheless, it is roughly limited to the above number of terms to give a comprehensive overview of relevant terminology in media art while at the same time being convenient to work with for content creators. Sitting at the heart of ADA’s classificatory approach, a considerable part relies on the accuracy of uploading artists and

scholars. Therefore, it is pivotal to maintain the Thesaurus well and keep it up to date with emerging expressions in the knowledge domain. This can be a tricky task, as in the fast-moving media art field, descriptive terms evolve as quickly as they vanish. There is no conventional standard to adhere to. However, there are promising initiatives like the newly published *Ontology for Media Art* by the Finnish Media Art Network (OMA). Should a terminology prevail in the future, it would be an invaluable step that could enable an in-depth connection between archiving platforms not only based on names of artists and artworks but semantic layers as well. At a small scale, which reveals the possibilities of semantic comparative analysis, this has been achieved with the Bridge Thesaurus. Via the vocabulary, it connects the databases of ADA and the Göttweig Abbey Graphic Collection, one of Austria's largest private collections of engravings with approximately 30,000 prints, primarily from the Baroque and Renaissance period.<sup>6</sup> Linking these archives facilitates comparative, trans-historical, cross-cultural, and transdisciplinary art research by bringing together artworks from different historical and social contexts through the tagging system (Grau et al., "Documenting Media Art" 439). The Bridge Thesaurus, with its controlled vocabulary, is a powerful and copious source for researching the archive material. Our intention is to investigate its potential further and make it available to the users, one of the latest outcomes being a sunburst visualization of individual artists' keyword profiles (see fig. 2).

The Light Box is an online viewing tool that encourages comparative visual analysis of archive content. The core idea is based on the name given to the viewing device for analog film negatives by providing a framework for preview and comparison purposes. It functions as a

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<sup>6</sup> In cooperation with Göttweig, the Department of Image Science at the University for Continuing Education Krems also conducted the digitization of the collection in an earlier project (GSSG).



panel onto which material can be attached and arranged. As a logged-in user, it is possible to highlight ADA content while browsing through the archive to form a collection of material that can be loaded into the Light Box tool later. In the Light Box tool, visitors can individually arrange multiple artworks alongside descriptive information, keywords, available metadata, and additional materials provided by the artists. Several functions are provided to perform analysis and comparison: At the moment, the visual material can be scaled, zoomed in, and “overlapped” to facilitate a detailed comparison of images (see fig. 3).

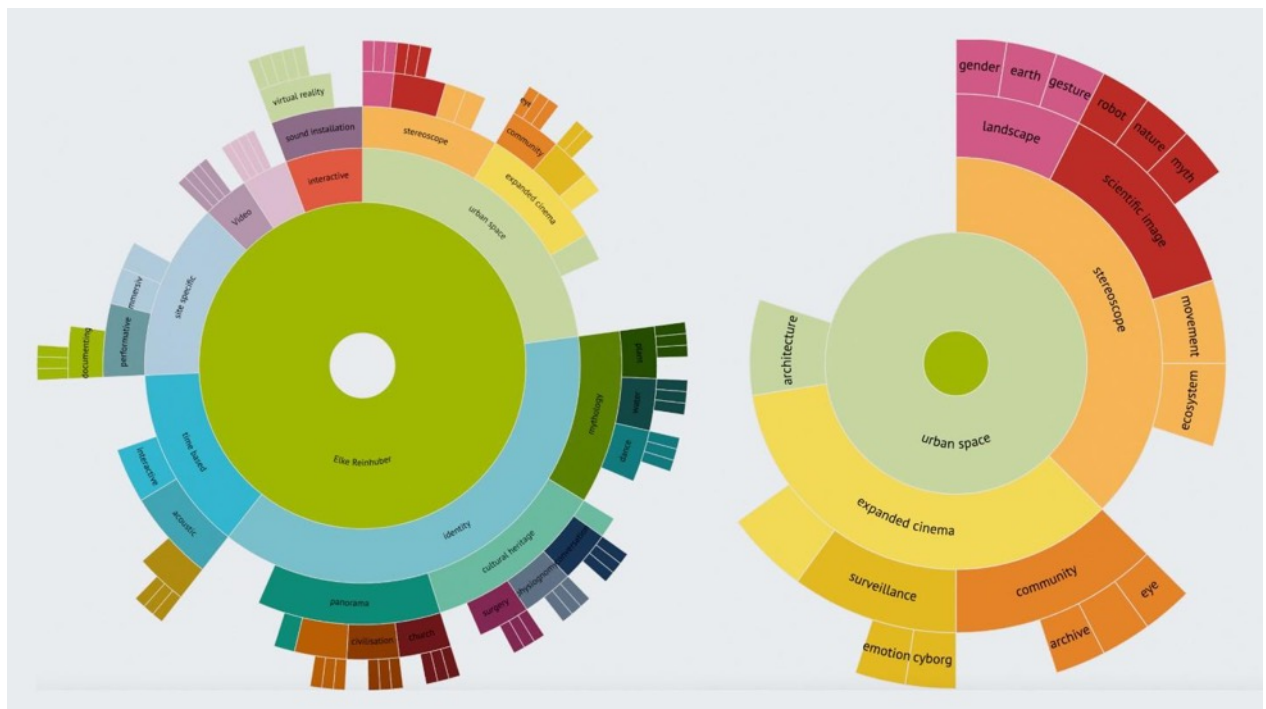


Fig 2. *Keyword profiles* give an overview of the artists based on the prevalence of tags they chose for their artworks (here Elke Reinhuber). Visualization by Michael Perl, © Center for Image Science, University for Continuing Education Krems.

Different versions of the working panel can be saved for later alterations and even published, for instance, in the framework of online exhibitions. The potential of this feature is not fully unrolled yet. To enhance the scholarly and social features of the Light Box, we are working on the expansion of its functionality to meet both the need for a viewing device and a community portal. A basic goal is to bring the two-dimensional plane of the Light Box into the third dimension: to develop the light table into a luminous space, which blurs the borders between analysis and contemplation. The source code of the newly developed Light Box tool will be released in an open-source context as the collaborative spirit of the global web development community fits to our ideals.

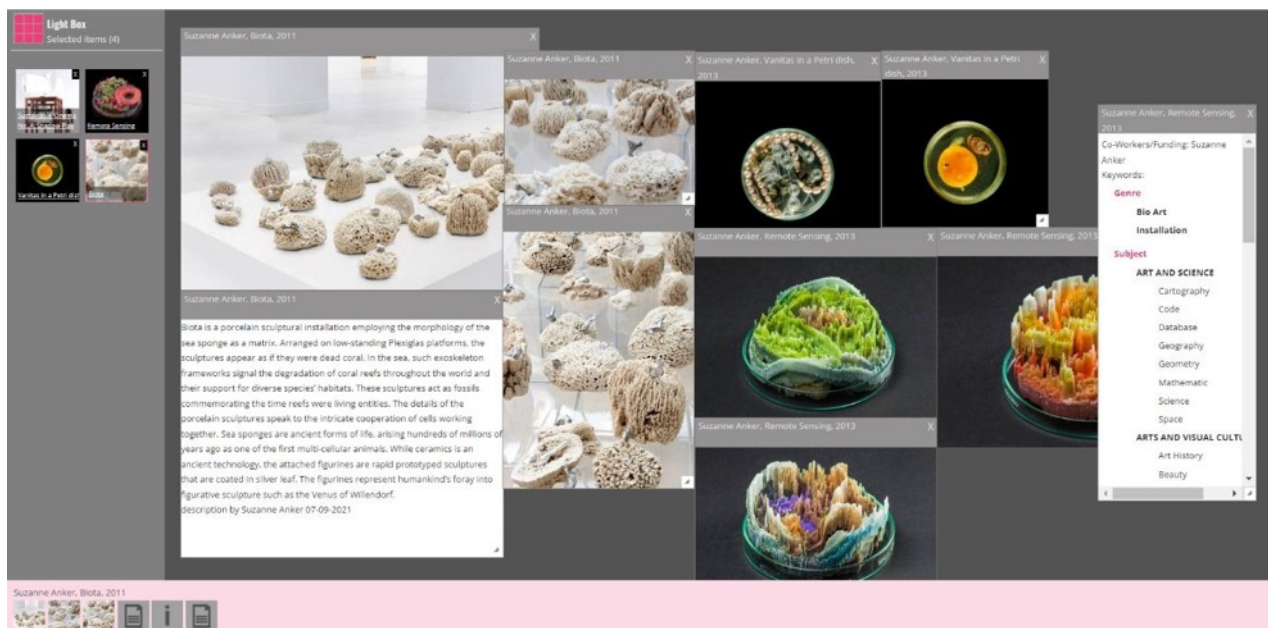


Fig 3. *Light Box*, image comparison tool (current version). © Center for Image Science, University for Continuing Education Krems.

Seeing the exciting paths that have been opened with all the former steps on ADA, administrative decisions, the incorporation of applications, and many other factors that resulted

in its broader orientation dedicated to collaboration, community, and exposing fresh knowledge, we want to keep up this enthusiasm for exploring uncharted areas and build on the excellent cornerstones that have already been laid. Our task is now not merely to develop or advance interactive tools to (re)combine the “open finitude” objects from the archive but to ask how we can connect them synergistically.

### **Toward Playfulness**

If the blurriness surrounding media art inspires experimental techniques and strategies in archiving, then, in order to focus on what can be gained instead of solely retained, we see playfulness as a promising mode of interaction arising from it. In that sense, we understand a mode of interaction that fosters openness to inspiration, to go with the flow, to reevaluate aesthetic judgment, and to reveal bias and presumption.

In fact, a somewhat playful approach to dealing with visual material in the context of art history was introduced in the 1920s by Aby Warburg in the shape of his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1924–1929, unfinished). By seemingly loosely arranging different images side by side, Warburg was aiming to expose themes and correspondences throughout Western visual culture—from Antiquity via Renaissance to modernity—by exploring reciprocal influences between text and images and, by doing so, relying on the prolific tension between perception and apperception. With regard to Lena Bader, the state of the introduced vision could be seen as constitutively dynamic as, on the one hand, ever new meanings are created and interconnections made possible, and, on the other hand, a dialogic relation between the viewer and the material is established. Furthermore, Bader highlights the playfulness of this visual argumentation (“wo Formen *und* Blicke anfangen zu spielen,” Bader 44) and the productivity of knowledge gain. The viewers find themselves wandering about a scope of visual experience and mutable contemplation, embarking

on a timeless, trans-historical journey embracing ambiguity and, hence, blurriness. Johnson accordingly states about Warburg that “if his juxtaposition of images and panels self-consciously flirts with anachronism, then this is because Warburg believed that humanity, in fact, was forever oscillating between extremes of emotion and reason” (11).

As shown, Warburg’s method of comparative analysis enabled a new vision, a kaleidoscopic view that is mainly characterized by a nonlinear, time-based assessment of a collection of images set side by side, advocating for a very distinct form of perceptual knowledge gained in the framework of cultural studies (Johnson 11). Furthermore, it enables transdisciplinary and transmedia analysis and makes it possible to apply the depicted concept of blurriness to involve media art and its phenomena into close reading. Warburg’s “blurry vision” is playful as it is pleasurable, process-oriented, it is immersive, and yet tied to the here and now. It highlights the qualities of the aesthetic experience. Thus, we would like to plead for an aesthetic of multiplicity and differences, of heterogeneity and amazement when it comes to media art archiving and analysis.

In conjunction with the reflection upon media art archiving, we can gain from Warburg’s concept of a “blurry vision” as it brings to light the main characteristics of media art that in traditional archiving contexts pose a challenge and possibly a threat. This means, for instance, its ephemeral nature, its interactive characteristic, and its exceptional relation to time and space. As Wolfgang Ernst argues, the spatial dimension of the archive transforms into a temporal dimension as the dynamization of the digital archive involves time-based procedures, which makes it possible for us to shift the focal point from the archival data to the archival experience. Since the dynamic temporal storage of digital archives is a place of permanent data transfer and, therefore, a sphere of ever new configurations and constellations, a sphere of constant change, it

gives way to link the idea of a playful “blurry” vision to the experience of the archive (“The Archive as Metaphor” 48).

Just as Aby Warburg accomplished in the framework of his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Walter Benjamin formed a metaphoric archaeology of modernity with his *Passagen-Werk*, “for it, too, collects history’s artifacts to furnish a now material” (Johnson x). Just like the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Benjamin’s unfinished *Passagen-Werk* proposes a playful mode to comprehend contemporary phenomena, to indulge in an unfiltered stream of associations and impressions. Experiencing the transformation of Paris into a metropolis, Walter Benjamin noted the disruptive force of the flâneur, who somehow defies the modern inclination to efficiency and growth with his seemingly random act of strolling, while really being a keen observer with an “illustrative vision” (Benjamin 528). Benjamin’s concept of the flâneur as a pleasure-driven figure that wanders about in time and space gives way to an adapted, playful concept of exploration, to which we aim to offer appropriate tools. Therefore—coming back to ADA and to the adaption and development of archival tools—our online tool development circles around the idea of bringing the “blurriness” of media art into congruence with the potential of an associative and illustrative vision (Warburg, Benjamin) to create an environment for media art exploration.

Hence, we ask ourselves what it could mean to “flâner” through an online archive and how digital tools could enable it. Based on the assumption that research questions are often either extremely specific or—in light of big datasets and computational capabilities—take a meta-perspective, we propose that to “flâner” could act in the in-between. It should provoke both artists and researchers to playfully (re)combine archive material, thereby uncovering unexpected connections, oddities, and stimulating questions for further exploration. Consequently, the question is not merely what single tools are provided for visitors but also how well they are

integrated in order to provide a multitude of access points and routes through an online archive environment.

In the course of our research project, the idea of “flâner” allows us to conceptually intertwine the existing tools for visual analysis (Light Box) on the one hand and semantic analysis (Bridge Thesaurus) on the other. As our focus lies on adequate methods for documenting, analyzing, and creatively engaging with works in the field of media art as well as expanding the community feature of the existing online platform, the application of immersive web technologies meets both objectives. For example, the open-source tool Collectionscope would be ideal for connecting it to the Thesaurus, allowing visitors to sort and combine image content based on the controlled vocabulary, which could then be moved to the Light Box for

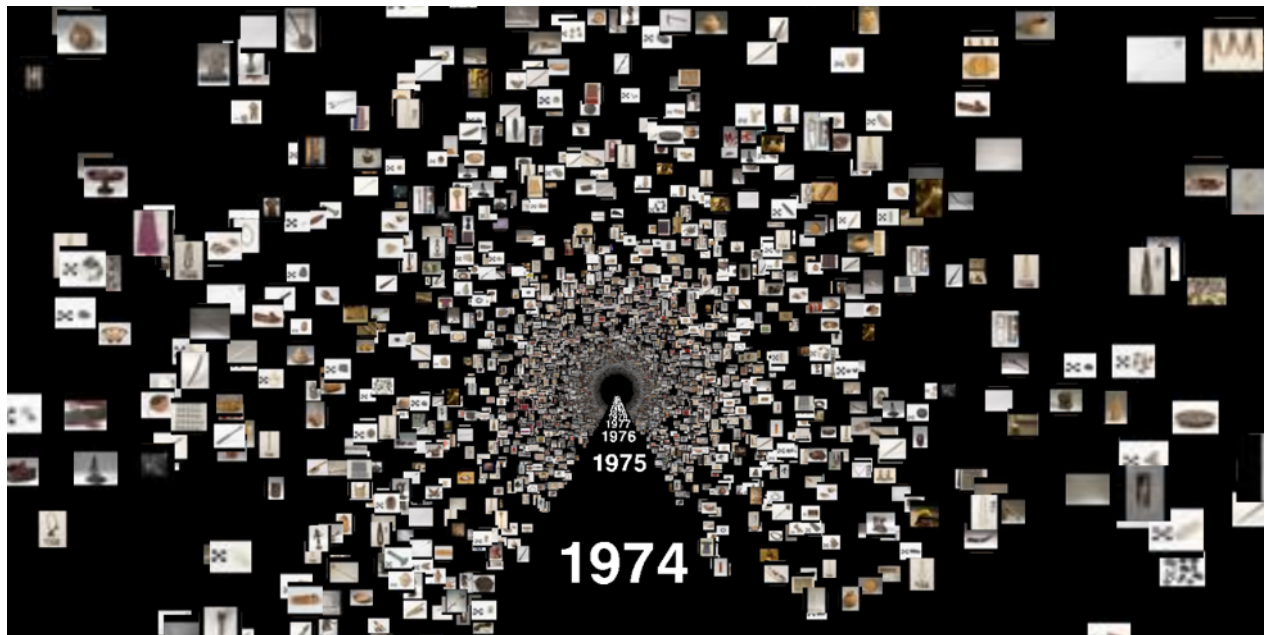


Fig 4. *Collectionscope*, visualization tool. © Supported by The Knight Foundation, built by the American Museum of Natural History, Science Visualization Group.

further analysis (see fig. 4). Ultimately, our goal is to create an archive environment that permits the user to seamlessly transit between the spheres of browsing and close analysis, thereby allowing the mode of interaction with the archive to change fluidly.

## Conclusion

In this article we elaborated on the idea of blurriness as a determining quality of media art culture, from its multifarious community to its experimentative stance mirrored in its ability to adapt to new technologies and its proneness to transgress disciplinary borders. Our argument is that this trait translates into the field of (digitally) documenting media art where it promotes exploration. We backed our argument with practical examples from ADA starting with its collaborative approach and ending with our current concept of playfulness. With regard to theoretical standpoints that focus on loss, we wanted to illustrate that in our view the digital realm facilitates (re)combination and expansion to gain novel insights and aesthetic approaches. After all, context and processuality add to the richness of artworks, but they arise from letting different, autonomous objects interact and touch. We hold that one shouldn't get too hung up on what cannot be archived to a full extent, but to create context and continue the process with what is given—in case of ADA that is what the artists share by uploading.

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# Invasive Media: The Making of A *Gregarious Species*

**Natasha Raheja**

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In 2019, millions of gregarious desert locust swarms flew across the India-Pakistan border and ravaged farmers' fields. Rising emissions had yielded melting glaciers and heavy rains which are suitable conditions for locust eggs to hatch and survive. In the same year, Indian government officials described migrants as termites at nationalist rallies across the country. Pakistani state ministers suggested people cook locust biryani. Farmers started to wonder if locusts were bioweapons from enemy countries, sent to destroy their crops. As plant scientists met at the India-Pakistan border to discuss how to manage this "transboundary pest," Indian farmers circulated videos of locusts on YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Staged hangings and beheadings of "foreigner locusts" betrayed the masculinist, nationalist idioms of farmer insecurity in the Thar Desert region. Pakistani, Sindhi and Urdu news media asked whether locusts were *halal* or *haram*. Indian, Hindi news media reported the swarms with headlines such as "Seema Paar, Tiddee Terror" ("Cross-Border, Locust Terror"). Together with news footage of contemporaneous xenophobic political rallies, these locust videos comprised a dense, blurry swarm of digital media images of "invasive others."



Fig 1. Locusts covering a tree, as seen through a cracked jeep window in the Thar Desert.

In *A Gregarious Species* (2021, 10 min), my practice-based study of digital media images of locusts, I leverage the blur as a formal filmic technique to connect nationalism, environmental crisis, and everyday precarity as interlinked phenomena. Evoking the felt sensations of a blurry locust swarm—a dense, whirling, cloud-like phenomenon—my glitchy, split-screen assembly of cellphone videos aver nature/culture as a cacophonous zone of indistinction. In the two-minute opening sequence, we see a series of fuzzy videos of thousands of locusts marching and flying across desert patches, crop fields, asphalt roads, and urban terraces. I collected high-resolution footage of locusts on my Canon C100 camera while accompanying fieldworkers on their pest control missions and farmers in their crop fields. Foregoing sleek recordings, I chose to source the film with found footage. To evoke popular visions of locust swarms, I used low-resolution “poor images” (Steyerl) from individually produced mobile phone videos. For Hito Steyerl, poor images are the debris, trash, and excess of capitalist image production, lacking value within the class society of images. I bring together such blurry cellphone videos from India and Pakistan to reveal links between dispersed producers across borders. My arrangement of these poor images

seeks neither to inform nor entertain, but to organize viewers into anti-national forms of thinking through a shared experience of the locust swarm.

Two scientific terms for locusts caught my attention in developing this piece: “gregarization” and “transboundary.” Both terms offer an entry point into thinking together about insects and blurs. Indeed, the rapid movement of most flying insects appears blurry to the human eye. Scientists use the term “transboundary” to refer to the way animals, insects, and plants move across national borders. International bodies such as the United Nations use the term to promote cooperation between countries for managing cross-border “pests” such as locusts. While the administrative-scientific term partially maintains the mythos of state territories, its usage also betrays the artifices of international borders by recognizing that nonhuman mobility “naturally” exists outside of such borders. In this vein, Eleana Kim’s theorization of the term “flyway path” offers visions for interdependent, cross-border connections. While ecologists use the phrase to refer to animal migration paths that link ecosystems across countries, Kim sees these flyways as planetary models for privileging nonhuman animal agency. An attention to interspecies cross-border movements points to possibilities for symbiotic relations beyond domination and subordination. Indeed, insects have long been iconic figures for theorizing sociopolitical formations (Schwaighofer).

I evoke these contiguous geographies and shared cultural landscapes of locust flight through the juxtaposition of unmarked mobile phone videos from Sindh and Rajasthan, Karachi and Delhi. The cuts and split screens yoke these disparate, yet linked, locales together into a zone of indistinction, even as a postcolonial international border has split the region into “enemy states.” Shots of pesticide-spraying drones against a blue sky followed by the lifeless locusts are a reminder of the militaristic connections between border control and pest management in this

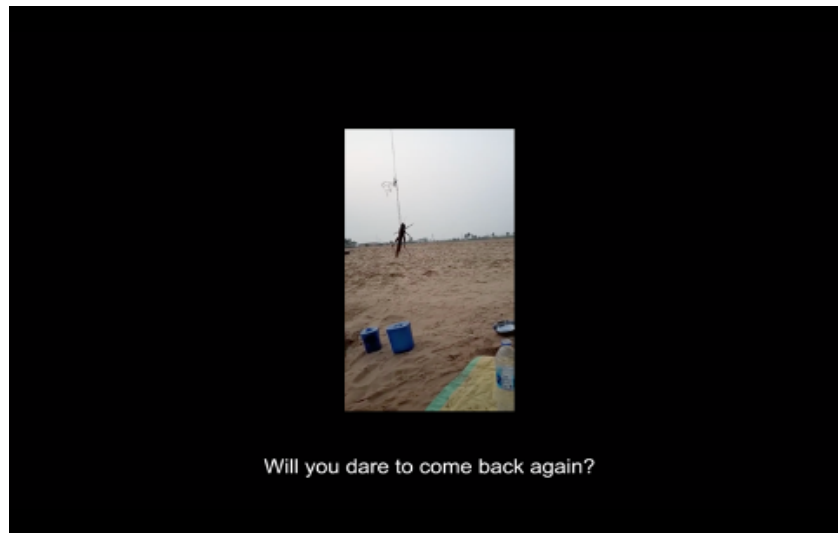


Fig 2, 3, 4. Screenshot of farmer-produced mobile phone videos of locusts in the film.

desert region. Even as the plant scientists I interviewed spoke fondly of cross-border meetings with their counterparts in other countries, the hawkish fervor of news coverage and governmental rhetoric about foreign locusts pierced the air.

As locusts travel across contiguous geographies, they also move between and bring together discourses of multiple stakeholders: farmers, scientists, and politicians. In two moments in the film, flying locusts from a farmer's mobile phone video flicker on the screen, interjecting into a Zoom webinar and a political rally. The glitch effect contends that pest management,

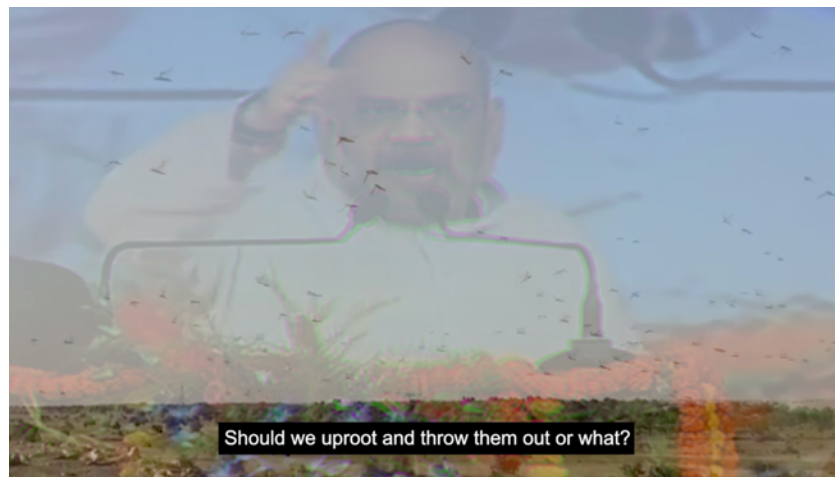


Fig 5. Glitch screen.

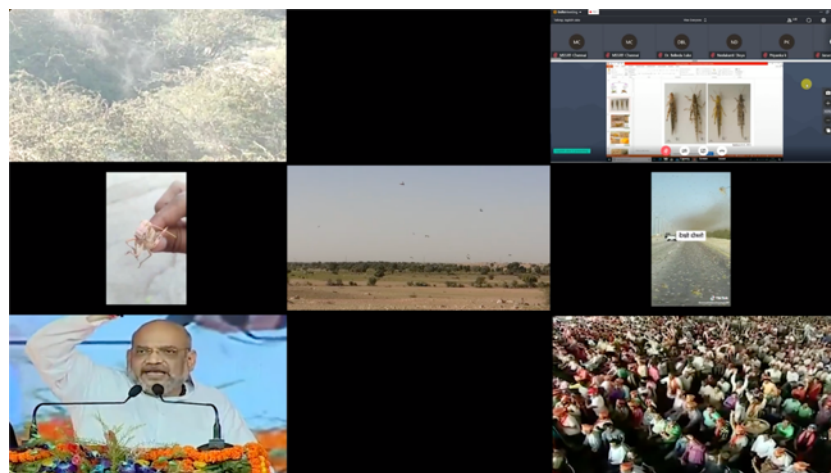


Fig 6. Split-screen collage in closing sequence.

nationalist, and everyday farmer discourses are overlapping. These arenas are interlinked through the locust, a slippery boundary object that retains its form even as it shifts across perspectives (Starr and Griesemer).

Moreover, the glitches suggest a bug in the system. The locust, of course, is a literal bug in the visual field, but the nationalist rhetoric of government officials and everyday farmers alike are wider systemic failures that perpetuate inequities. The glitch also suggests that the penetrative force of swarming bugs and climate change supersede the social artifice of borders. Even as an Indian government official calls for the expulsion of foreigners, we see flying insects defiantly enter the frame.

Frames proliferate in the closing sequence, a cacophonous split screen. The split screen is a visual argument about the proliferation of sensory inputs and the overwhelming collision of nationalist rhetoric, scientific jargon, and farmer insecurity. The cascading xenophobia on screen further conveys the anti-sociality of nationalism, as well as the limits of technocratic governance to contain the swell of swarms. Reminiscent of the glitchy cut to flying locusts after the moderator's question in the Zoom webinar, "What is the one we should worry about, [Solitary or Gregarious Females]?" the split screen conveys the indistinction between individuals in collective formations like the swarm. Like thousands of individual locusts in a swarm, scientific, nationalist, and agrarian discourses comprise an entangled force.

Engaging Jussi Parikka's notion of "insect media," the final arrangement of multiple frames draws from the "gregarious" social organization of locusts, the swarm. Evocative of the gregarization process, whereby solitary locusts "gregarize," changing color from brown to electric yellow and becoming indistinguishable from one another in an aggregate swarm, the split



screen suggests the interrelatedness of discursive fields. This interrelatedness is also gestured toward throughout the film through the inclusion of videos from TikTok, a platform that operates through inter-referentiality. Akin to the individually indistinguishable locusts in a swarm, these mobile videos' meaning and existence are defined in relation to a wider whole. As we apprehend the locust as mediating between multiple stakeholders, we arrive at a rendering of insects not only through media (Brown), but as media (Klein; Parikka). Through a zootechnical swarm-like arrangement, the overlays and cuts in the film mimic the entanglement of multiple discourses, the entanglement of insects and media.

In sum, the film argues that insect images circulate within a populist discursive sphere that leverages an interspecies language of pestilence, reifying national binaries between citizen and foreigner while blurring other boundaries. The film visualizes how locusts metaphorically and materially stand in for foreigners and minorities as pests external to the national body politic. Magnifying the insect as a flexible symbol and substance across borders, my artistic work engages broader conversations about insectivity (Brown) and invasive others (Ticktin; Subramaniam). Moreover, my exploration of the affects of political rallies with “poor images” adds to our understanding of populism's enchantments amidst subaltern dispossession (Akhtar).

Like the excesses that spill out of nationalist frames, locust flight and the plurality of lived realities exceed the binaries of borders. The blurry, “transboundary,” and “gregarious” movements of nonhuman animals pose challenges to the contain-and-capture impulses of border regimes and smartphone cameras. There is both tragedy and optimism, then, in the border sequence where we can see the continuous desert landscape through gaps in a barbed wire fence, aware of a thorny separation. The overlaid lyrics of a classic Bollywood song from this TikTok video of locusts at the border are foreboding even as they seem to offer some assurance:

*bura waqt hai, magar gham nahin*

*juda honewale kabhi ham nahin*

*ki yah dosti toot sakti nahin*

[It is a difficult time, but there is no sorrow.

We will never be separated. This friendship cannot be broken.]

*A Gregarious Species* visualizes the deafening rhetoric of invasion across our natural and national worlds. The film features locusts as flying, trans/boundary objects that connect nationalist politics and farmer insecurity. Through blurs, split screens, and glitches, I contemplate interbeing between citizens and foreigners, states and nations, insects and humans, and screens and selves.

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