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Good Game

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Acknowledgment

To my peers, to my mentors, to my partner, to my family, and to you.

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Abstract

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This thesis and its corresponding art installation, *Lessons from Ziggy*, attempts to deconstruct the variables prevalent within several complex systems, analyze their transformations, and propose a methodology for reasserting the soap box within the display pedestal. In this text, there are several key and specific examples of the transformation of various signifiers (i.e. media-bred fear's transformation into a political tactic of surveillance, contemporary freneticism's transformation into complacency, and community's transformation into nationalism as a state weapon). In this essay, all of these concepts are contextualized within the exponential growth of new technologies. That is to say, all of these semiotic developments must be framed within the post-Internet sphere.

Introduction

Our world is bound by loose threads of aesthetic and semiotic resemblance. Any image or concept can represent another chosen form when placed within an unfamiliar or rearranged context. Be it a phenomenological[1] or syntactical and semiological[2] approach (or both simultaneously), narratives and evocations take form not necessarily from an individual image alone, but from a set of imagery. This is the photographer's tradition in mediating and sequencing images produced by the camera. This is also the tactic of the political propagandist. A user's reading and understanding of cultural iconography shifts within the atmosphere of that very same culture. Our visual literacy is fragile—it can easily be transformed or subverted (and sometimes weaponized) within something as simple as the passage of time. For the viewer, the relationship between iconography is an amalgamation of the public and private spheres, informed by both personal and social values. From a single photograph alone, what one viewer might assume to be a riot could in all actuality be a peaceful protest. This duality leaves the contemporary artist with a moral quandary: an attempt to thoughtfully preserve the ethical clarity of imagery while also contextualizing that concept within the changing, ever-accelerating, technological political and cultural atmosphere. Following this logic of the semiotic power of iconography, my work catalogs and appropriates the imagery associated with our "culture of fear" to analyze and mimic complex sociopolitical

[1] See Bettina Lockemann, "A Phenomenological Approach to the Photobook," *Imprint. Visual Narratives in Books and Beyond* (Gothenburg: Art and Theory Publishing, 2013), pp. 83-127.

[2] See David Bate, "The Syntax of a Photowork," *Imprint. Visual Narratives in Books and Beyond* (Gothenburg: Art and Theory Publishing, 2013), pp. 49-85.

structures. I purposefully abstract the icons that refer to contemporary systems such as late capitalism, surveillance states, and speculative posthumanism. By oversimplifying these signifiers of power, I can subvert their complexities. This is an absurd gesture reminiscent of our accelerating, hyperlinked world of networked signifiers. The contemporary material is that of the impermanent symbol. In order to establish a basis for, or even to comprehend, the iconography at play, I must first dissect the shifting cultural atmosphere. And where else to begin besides the symbols that construct and comprise "fear" itself?

"[T]he two planes of the articulated language must also exist in other significant systems. Although the units of the syntagm… cannot be defined *a priori* but only as the outcome of a general commutative test of the signifiers and the signifieds, it is possible to indicate the plane of the semiological systems without venturing as yet to designate the syntagmatic units…" Roland Barthes[3]

It is no exaggeration to assert that we live in a complex world. The man-made structures that define our contemporary sphere—politics, economy, culture—are comprised of innumerable individual variables that affect our daily lives. Even our language systems are built around the development of complex networks. Languages and semiotic structures, comprised of signifiers and signified, merge in an endless array of combinations of syntagms and paradigms. And when the media analyzes these complex systems, its presentation of this information seems to breed immense fear, anxiety, and inevitably, helplessness. In *The Culture of Fear* (1999), sociologist Barry Glassner paints a picture of a corporate media structure that flourishes under the exaggerated and sometimes false narratives that emerge in its attempts to simplify these complex systems. Not only do they convey our information, they decide what information has weight. He argues that although the information itself cannot be controlled by media, media outlets fully construct a mediated reality by "favoring" specific information.[4] And this constructed narrative has a direct impact on its participants. As Glassner states, "The short answer to why Americans harbor so many

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[3] Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York City: Hill and Wang, 1997 reprint 1964), p. 61.

[4] Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear* (New York City: Basic Books, 1999), p. 202.

misbegotten fears is that immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes."[5]

Video artist Brian Springer catalogued and analyzed major news outlets' unencrypted satellite raw data channels in his film *Spin* (1995) (Fig. 1), showing the direct influence that political spin-doctors and the media outlets had in determining how information was presented during the 1992 election news cycle. These broadcasts were unencrypted, live feeds that media stations would transmit in order to receive and assemble news stories back at the station headquarters' editing labs. By constantly monitoring (surveilling) the feed, Springer was able to discover unique moments of insider conversations, back-room deals, and propagandist tactics that shape public consciousness. Today, however, these channels are encrypted and transmitted digitally, obfuscating our ability to understand and critique their infrastructures. This cryptic concealment occurs not only in the fourth estate, but amongst nations. And this national lack of transparency is directly addressed by Laura Poitras in her 2014 film, *Citizenfour* (Fig. 2). At its core, the film documents Edward Snowden's leaks of the National Security Agency's ongoing surveillance of world populace. In 2016, in an effort to grasp the full implications of Snowden's leaks, Poitras mounted a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Astro Noise* (Fig. 3), a large-scale art installation that visualized both insurmountable data and unprecedented surveillance alike. Here, the tactic of artist and whistleblower are one in the same. As Trevor Paglen outlines in his essay for the *Astro Noise* show catalog, satellite "Moonbounce" technologies originally

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[5] Glassner, 1999, p. XXVIII.

developed and utilized in an effort to explore the intergalactic void were turned back toward earth in 1966 in what he cites as "the genesis of planetary mass surveillance."[6] This realization of technological advancement and its application against people complicates the agency within artworks such as Brian Springer's film. On a micro scale, Springer was able to subvert satellite technologies in order to critique media consumption. On a macro scale, those same satellites had long been tools of a devastating political agenda.

Critical design collective Metahaven's film installation, *The Sprawl* (2016) (Fig. 4), updates Springer's media critique into a broader narrative where information technologies and state inculcation merge to form a grander political tool. *The Sprawl* presents Russia's contemporary propagandist efforts as it is portrayed by Russia's government-run media outlet, RT (Russia Today). The film analyzes Russia's reliance on surveilling social media during the Colour revolution to sculpt its propaganda and assess its effectiveness. More recently, since the outset of 2017, Russia, Donald Trump, and Wiki-Leaks seem to be caught within a narrative that resembles a vast, developing conspiracy,[7] and our media systems seem to falter in every attempt to simplify its events.[8] The only thing that inarguably ties all three of these entities together is their steadfast ideology. Adam Curtis' films for the BBC (namely: *HyperNormalisation*, *All*

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[6] Trevor Paglen, "Listening to the Moons," *Astro Noise* (New York City and New Haven: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2016), p. 113.

[7] See David E. Sanger, "Putin Ordered 'Influence Campaign' Aimed at U.S. Election, Report Says," *The New York Times*, 6 Jan 2017.

[8] See Paul Wood, "Trump 'compromising' claims: How and why did we get here?," *BBC News*, (12 Jan 2017).

Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, *The Trap*) (Figs. 5-7) argue that theoretical and political ideology are what drive nations forward, but as he points out, politicians are drawn to this ideology in an attempt to formulate meaning out of chaos. The product of fear within media presentation may only be symptomatic of larger, uncontrollable systems—our inability to grasp and simplify these systems. Essentially, hegemonic structures (propaganda, political ideology, surveillance) are a fleeting attempt to apply "security" and give meaning to a complex semiotic system.

In an effort to establish a conceptual and theoretical framework in which we can analyze the ever-growing complexities of the modern world (or at least the "modern world" of the 1980's), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose the notion of the "rhizome."[9] Under their framework, a structure (i.e. the organic mushroom or tuber) is connected via a vast network of links (i.e. rhizomes) that exist underground, but we as surface viewers are only capable of perceiving the above-ground structure. Within the rhizome framework, both structure and link are equally important. In many of Adam Curtis' films, the conceptual links between political and ideological structures are unseen, and thus abstracted. However, in *Society of the Spectacle,* philosopher Guy Debord argues that the abstract becomes real in its oversimplification and assertion. According to Debord, perpetuated capital establishes a realm of "the spectacle" wherein capital manifests physically as an image material that directly influences our participation in its systems.[10]

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[9] See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 1980, reprint 1987).

[10] See Guy Debord *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970, reprint 1983).

Designer Ben Duvall's *New Modernism(s)* points out how artists and designers similarly conflate (and inflate) simplified iconography in attempt to reference an abstract and vast "hyperlinked" network of signifiers. This is a practice that he dubs "hypermodernism:"

> The simplicity of these icons tends toward a fixed but hyperlinked meaning… It is communication learned from the internet, a single icon must compress complexity to a microsecond, the language of the ever-scrolling reader… it assumes a superficial read and therefore must speak an easily identified language.[11]

In my work, I simultaneously critique and embody this hyperlinked version of the spectacle by absurdly abstracting and oversimplifying the iconographies of fear and power while simultaneously acknowledging their links. If all of an artwork's signifiers are present, but applied in a subversive manner, can they still point toward the same paradigms for which they stand? Utilizing the signifiers of power, I can point toward these complexities and our fear of the contemporary world. These hyperlinked signifiers point toward—but never explicitly spell out—coming change, catalyzed by tangible technological innovations (i.e. automation, gamification, and posthumanism) that are all complicit in similar economic and political strategies. At face value, these signifiers indicate a rapidly approaching collapse.

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[11] Ben Duvall, *New Modernism(s)* (Brooklyn: Self-Published, 2014), p. 38.

"There is no 'clash of civilizations.' There is a clinically dead civilization kept alive by all sorts of life-support machines that spread a peculiar plague into the planet's atmosphere. At this point it can no longer believe in a single one of its own 'values', and any affirmation of them is considered an impudent act, a provocation that should and must be taken apart, deconstructed, and returned to a state of doubt." The Invisible Committee[12]

Glassner recalls Samuel Taylor Coleridge's warning, "In politics, what begins in fear usually ends up in folly."[13] It's worth noting that Glassner's analysis primarily focused only on the American cultural sphere, and most importantly, was written pre-9/11. Once we add international terrorism to the equation, the rhizomatic rhetorical complex expands beyond the national into the global sphere. Glassner points out that although they were usually the first to be accused, radical Islamic sects were rarely to blame for the terrorist attacks and catastrophes of the 1990s.[14] But what happens when these groups *are* to blame for these tragedies? Is it a media-bred, self-fulfilling prophecy?

For this reason, a group of critical theorists, Post-Marxists, and postmodernists (including but not limited to Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Slavoj Zizek) were not surprised by the events of September 11th, 2001.[15] In an application of Marx's critique

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[12] The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles and Cambridge: Semiotext(e) and The MIT Press, 2007, reprint 2009), p. 92.

[13] Glassner, 1999, p. XXVIII.

[14] Glassner, 1999, p. XXVIII.

[15] See Peter Lecouras, Peter, "9/11, Critical Theory, and Globalization," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* Vol. 12, No. 1. (University Park: Penn State University Press, Fall 2010).

of Hegel's doubled history, Zizek cites the terrorist act on 9/11 as "tragedy," and years later, the rhetoric utilized in coping, nationally, with the subprime mortgage crisis and its resulting recession as "farce." He writes:

> We should note the similarity of President Bush's language in his addresses to the American people after 9/11 and after the financial collapse: they sounded very much like two versions of the same speech. Both times Bush evoked the threat of the American way of life and the need to take fast and decisive action to cope with the danger. Both times he called for the partial suspension of American values (guarantees of individual freedom, market capitalism) in order to save these very same values.[16]

Contemporary Post-Marxist theory acknowledges the problems endemic to capitalist and neo-capitalist markets and applies these struggles to a international globalized sphere. Not only does accountability lie on the market and its players (the subjugating class), but on "the state" as well.

Borrowing and subverting Edward Luttwak's "turbo-capitalism," Baudrillard constructs an analogy of a static system that propels itself forward. A natural system can grow and evolve over time, producing recognized and defined characteristics based on shifting global focus. However, in a "turbo" mode, the system approaches stasis and propels itself forward utilizing (among many of Baudrillard's "-isms") simulacra, absorption, recognition of parody, and illusion of balance. Baudrillard likens this model to a jet turbine. This analogy alludes to an impending crash, burnout, or collapse. If our political and economic systems are no longer developing, they can only implode.[17] And not only is this fate inevitable, the system itself seems to be structured in a way that

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[16] Slavoj Zizek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London and New York City: Verso, 2009), p. 1.

[17] See Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (Los Angeles and Cambridge: Semiotext(e) and The MIT Press, 2010), pp. 61-62.

braces for this collapse. Virilio would call this the dromosphere, a society more concerned with technological speed and growth than it is with its own people.[18] The political need for development (both in weapons and communications) embraces a chaotic cultism of progress, which in turn births its own unique brand of decay. The techno-optimistic rhetoric inherent in the perpetuation of unchecked growth by both the state and private sector (the dromosphere) actively ignores its own follies. And in this, the decay of accelerationism takes form as a mediated rhetoric (or narrative) that chips away at our notions of truth itself. An anonymous group of French theorists and activists, using the moniker "The Invisible Committee," have written that this is a Western development:

> Saying "nothing is true" says nothing about the world but everything about the Western concept of truth. For the West, truth is not an attribute of beings or things, but of their representation. A representation that conforms to experience is held to be true.[19]

Western ideology can be defined by the false assertion of an inherent truth within an ever-failing capital. Not only is our concept of truth being diluted, our own semantics in discussing these systems seems to be collapsing. As linguist Armen Avanessian and political theorist Suhail Malik note, we have begun to speculate based on an extrapolation of the present. Along with our obsession with speed, we live in a world obsessed with the "pre"—that is to say "preemptive strikes, preemptive policing, the

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[18] See Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear* (Los Angeles and Cambridge: Semiotext(e) and The MIT Press, 2012).

[19] The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 93.

preemptive personality."[20] And this anticipation informs our present decisions, our economies, and our politics. Our reliance on speculative computational algorithms allows our concept of the future to shape the future as if it were past and present: a "time-complex."[21] As a result, there seems to be a semiotic loss of meaning. In photography, we see this collapse by the pre-emptive notion that all images have already been captured—all gestures explored.[22] In the continued online proliferation of photographic replication and representation, Walter Benjamin's "eliminated" "aura"[23] continues to be symptomatic of these technologies, their speed, and their collapse. At the advent of cinema, Benjamin recognized the philosophical correlation between image production and factory production. He argued that the mechanically replicated object, unlike a painting, can be dissociated from context within its endless reproducibility. Thus, it is dissociated from authenticity, and in that, the spiritual element that defines the unique object—what he terms the "aura."

The aura or spirit is a consistent symbol in the development and continuation of Marxism. After the Revolutions of 1848, Marx's first line in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* references Communism as a substantive, invisible political force (or "spectre").[24] Jacques Derrida utilizes this term in *Specters of Marx*, as a symbolic spirit

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[20] See Armen Avanessian Armen and Suhail Malik, "The Time-Complex. Postcontemporary.," *DIS Magazine Post-Contemporary Issue* (Apr 2016).

[21] See Avanessian, 2016.

[22] For Example: Lyle Rexer, "Brighter Than a Billion Sunsets," *Harper's Magazine* (July 2016), p. 68.

[23] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations* (New York City: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 221.

[24] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party: Authorized english translation* (New York City: International Publishers, 1935).

of Marx that can continue to influence the world beyond the demise of the Soviet Union. This is a foundation of Post-Marxist thought: the application of Marxist-informed criticism within a capitalistic regime. Concerned with the concept of media representation and capital's present and coming acceleration after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Derrida asks, "What can one do with the Marxist schemas in order to deal with this today—theoretically and practically—and thus in order to change it?"[25] Mark Fisher utilizes both Marx and Derrida to argue a contrastingly pessimistic assertion reminiscent of Avanessian's time-complex. He posits that the participants within capitalism, as a structure foreseen to collapse, knowingly treat that collapse as an inevitability. Not only are we haunted by a failed ideological present, we are haunted by a future that never came. For Fischer, this future collapse is a ticking clock (or "lost future") that takes form within artworks made post-Internet, as an aesthetic of future "nostalgia," one of mourning a coming death. What was once a techno-optimistic future is now the ghost of a failed technological future. He categorizes this aesthetic method of creation under Derrida's "hauntology" wherein the ghosts of the past and future haunt us within the present.[26]

It is important to note that, going under the moniker k-punk, Fisher was an active participant in early online forums and communities. And the Internet's accelerated rise and assimilation within capital informed his modes of writing. This micro-history of early-Internet communication is made most apparent in a 1994 essay written by Carmen

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[25] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), pp. 65-66.

[26] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

Hermosillo under her online pseudonym, humdog. In the essay, titled "pandora's vox: on community in cyberspace," humdog critiques the faulty techno-optimism prevalent within the early-Internet's rhetoric. She cites the irony that just beyond the subcultures, of which she was a member, existed an infrastructure (Compuserv and America Online) that not only profited from her abstract labor, but also policed her online behavior on a meta level. She states:

> beaudrilliard [sic] has said, socialization is measured according to the amount of exposure to information, specifically, exposure to media. the social itself is a dinosaur: people are withdrawing into activities that are more about consumption than anything else.[27]

It would seem that within the "new" technology of the internet—in its speed, replication, and decay—the public and private spheres have collapsed into one. The post-internet community is a singular configuration that functions as commodity to serve industrial and political goals.

In a lecture given during the Cybernetics Conference in New York City, artist and publisher Paul Soulellis analyzed these trappings as a participatory surveillance of "the feed" within contemporary social media platforms. We push our private lives into the public sphere simply by participating in these privately-held technologies. Simultaneously, we partake in and normalize a constant surveillance of ourselves and our peers. He stated, "Keeping us watching is part of the deal—pure, passive consumption that somehow, at the same time, feels active and powerful... a reverse panopticon, where we participate in the very structures that oppress."[28] Beyond Soulellis,

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[27] humdog, "pandora's vox: on community in cyberspace," Github.

[28] Paul Soulellis, "Performing the Feed" presentation (The Cybernetics Conference, Prime Produce, New York City, 18 Nov 2017).

this participation can take on even more perverse forms in the various practices of online trolling. For instance, in the action of "doxing," a user's private information is published online. This leads to more substantial and sometimes terroristic gestures such as "swatting," a prank where this information is used in hopes of inciting a physical altercation between unknowing victim and police (or SWAT team). On December 28, 2017, the first death occurred as a result of this action, where the anonymous troll called the police with false information of a hostage situation involving the victim.[29] And now that it is unmistakable that Russia propagandist efforts, across various social media platforms, had at least *some* hand in influencing the 2016 United States presidential elections,[30] it has become apparent that the rapid, endless feed and its surveillance is increasingly a tool of both private and political ideologies.

I believe that this situation implies a new (or updated) spectacle wherein protection from an abstract or unseen private, public, and political force requires a participatory reassertion of fleeting and unsubstantiated faith in capital. In order for the system to function properly, this reassertion requires all members to be complicit in its perpetuation. In this new spectacle of acceleration, not only do the public and private collapse, but the public, the private, and the political also fold into an all-encompassing, unmanageable body. And this form necessitates another abstract concept to physicalize—the unchecked fervor of nationalism.

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[29] Eric Van Allen "Police Kill 28-Year-Old After 'Swatting' Call [Update]." Kotaku (29 Dec 2017).

[30] Luke Harding, "What We Know about Russia's Interference in the US Election," The Guardian (16 Dec 2016).

"The financial meltdown made it impossible to ignore the blatant irrationality of global capitalism. Compare the $700 billion spent by the US alone in order to stabilize the banking system to the fact that of the $22 billion pledged by richer nations to help develop poorer nations' agriculture in the face of the current food crisis, only $2.2 billion has so far been made available. The blame for the food crisis cannot be placed on the usual suspects, such as the corruption, inefficiency and state interventionism of Third World states; on the contrary, it is directly dependent on the globalization of agriculture, as none other than Bill Clinton made clear in his comments on the crisis at the UN gathering marking World Food Day, under the indicative title: 'We Blew It On Global Food.' The gist of Clinton's speech was that the contemporary crisis shows how 'we all blew it, including me when I was president,' by treating food crops as commodities rather than as a resource obviously vital to the world's poor. Clinton was very clear in placing the blame not on individual states or governments, but on long-term Western policies imposed by the US and the European Union, and applied for decades by the World Bank, the IMF, and other international institutions." Slavoj Zizek[31]

The strategies of the political and private sectors are co-dependent in their perpetuation and propagation of treating resources and peoples as commodities. Between 1854 and 2010, ninety companies—mostly both IOC (investor owned company) and SOE (state-owned enterprise) producers of oil, natural gas, and coal—accounted for over half of carbon emissions contributing to climate change.[32] Does the accountability lie on these "carbon majors," or on our governments to police these companies? This is why we have tort law: to protect the general public from corporate interests. Yet, in his essay for *Harper's Magazine*, Ralph Nader outlines and gives specific examples of corporate and governmental efforts that culminate in a systematic effort to undermine

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[31] Zizek, 2009, pp. 81-82.

[32] Richard Heede, "Tracing anthropogenic CO2 and methane emissions to fossil fuel and cement producers, 1854-2010," Climatic Change (21 Nov 2013).

tort law.[33] He asks: "How… can the tort system withstand the attacks of the vast infrastructure dedicated to its destruction?"[34]

There is a corporate and political demand to protect the private sector from its own citizens and consumers. This is not because the consumer is at fault. It just seems to be the "terms of services" that we enter into due to a desire to legitimize and safeguard a faulty economic system. In the new spectacle, there is no adequate system for checks and balances. America's power as a nation is reliant on the strength of its private economies. In another Metahaven text, *Black Transparency*, they point to the continued reliance on private corporations as technology outpaces bureaucracy. Metahaven notes that even our most progressive legislation has invested heavily (both in finance and confidence) into the private sphere to contend with an accelerating world. They posit that the legislative arm has become a space where "boardrooms, spy bases, and data warehouses of surveillance" merge.[35] More specifically, with new technologies such as cloud computing, we have further privatized our information and data. They state: "With the cloud, the user no longer needs to understand how a software program works or where his or her data really is."[36] Similarly, Johannes Thumfart reminds his readers in "The Space Building Animal" that even our digital revolutions are reliant on tools owned and governed by privately-held technologies.[37]

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[33] Ralph Nader, "Suing for Justice." *Harper's Magazine* (Apr 2016), p. 59.

[34] Nader, 2016, p. 62.

[35] Metahaven, *Black Transparency* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), p. 147.

[36] Metahaven, *Black Transparency*, 2015, p. 78.

[37] Johannes Thumfart, "The Space Building Animal," *PWR PAPER #6* (Winter 2011/2012), p. 118.

Our freedoms online have completely dissipated so much so that news stories concerning online privacy seem to begin with a wink and a nudge. One tech news fluff piece on digital cookies begins: "*The bad news for the privacy-conscious* is that big Web companies and dozens of startups have begun testing or using cookie alternatives that are often more difficult to spot or disable" (emphasis mine).[38] Not only are our actions being tracked by our government, they're being tracked by our corporations. As our technologies progress, it would seem that our freedoms are diminishing, and our concept of democracy is fading in favor of the private sector. In Metahaven's words: "Life itself is the enemy of surveillance."[39]

To understand the real consequences of technological developments in a more human sense, we can look at Arundhati Roy's *The End of Imagination*, written after India's nuclear fusion weapon test in May of 1998. In this work, Roy emphasizes the growing disparity between its government and its people, and as a result, its peoples' inability to critique techno-optimism as a nationalistic endeavor. Had they been able to do so, they would have been greeted with nationalism's collusion as a political force. She recognizes that nationalism seems to be correlated with disparity: "The greater the numbers of illiterate people, the poorer the country and the more morally bankrupt the politicians, the cruder the ideas of what that identity should be."[40] What does it mean when a country's militaristic development is at the expense of its own people? And why

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[38] Olga Kharif, "The Cookies You Can't Crumble." *Bloomberg Businessweek* 25 – 31 (Aug 2014), p 37.

[39] Metahaven, *Black Transparency*, 2015, p. 148.

[40] Arundhati Roy, *The End of Imagination* (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1998), p. 39.

are the people fooled? Literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her *Nationalism and the Imagination*, determines that national identity isn't necessarily made up of any specific agent, but the "collective imagination" and collective nostalgia (or "rememoration").[41] And memory can easily be redefined and sculpted by propaganda. The minds of a country's people can be used as a weapon. Progress, propaganda, political ideology—these are the forces that drive nationalism. And nationalism itself is in-part driven by that same technological development.

From our inability to recognize and enact change within these structures, we become complacent. We begin to blame democracy. But Zizek believes that these problems are not inherently the fault of democracy, they are the products of the concept of *truth* within democracy. He states: "[democratic elections] are not *per se* an indication of Truth—on the contrary… they tend to reflect the predominant *doxa* determined by the hegemonic ideology."[42] Zizek cites a specific case: Tony Blair's 2005 re-election while his approval sat at unprecedented lows. He states, "Something was obviously very wrong here—it was not that people 'did not know what they wanted,' but rather that cynical resignation prevented them from acting upon it…"[43] As a result, there was a "weird gap" between the public's collective feelings and collective actions. Not only were the citizens complacent, they were complicit. On a broader scale, complicity is not the same as complacency, but they feed off of each other in service to state's power.

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[41] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Nationalism and the Imagination* (Salt Lake City: Seagull Books, 2015), p. 39.

[42] Zizek, 2009, p. 137.

[43] Zizek, 2009, pp. 136-137.

Johanna Drucker argues that even contemporary artistic gestures are just as complicit in the systems that they critique. She states, "Just as we can trace a shift between modern purity and contemporary complexity, so we can also see how the notion of autonomy… was displaced by contingency, and now by complicity."[44] Contemporary art is a market-driven vehicle. A capital-reliant art market has tainted our every yearning for dissent. Recently, we can see traces of this as artists revisit and rely on the aesthetics of established, historical artistic movements ("Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Arte Povera, Minimalism") to communicate their ideas more expediently and accessibly. Those same gestures are reliant on outdated politics that lack any sense of urgency.[45] But as Martha Rosler notes, the politics of complicity are part of what makes *photography* so interesting. Photography's transparent history as a commercial endeavor is what allows its viewer to better notice its subversion.[46] For me, this is not only because of photography's marketing commerciality. Subversion can be attributed to photography's accessibility as a consumer-ready medium. Photography's market-accessibility defines its democracy—its populism.

Systems are malleable. Semiotic categories evolve as signifiers are swapped out. And a culture of nationalism can be challenged by its subcultures. Hegemonic structures' identification of these signifiers is what pushes these systems forward. In Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, he analyzes this push and pull between

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[44] Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 10.

[45] See David Geers, "Neo-Modern," *October* 139 (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Winter 2012), p. 12.

[46] See Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," *Decoys and Disruptions* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 42.

hegemony and subculture. Not only do subcultures represent "noise" within the system, they can "block" the system by establishing "semantic disorder."[47] Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image" analyzes the imperfect aesthetic as a representation of dissent, and more importantly, its communities. The degrading quality of the replicated image (or "poor image") assigns its own unique aesthetic that becomes a form of activism.[48] When considering abstraction and oversimplification as a subversive and absurd gesture, we can look at the meme as a political device. In Metahaven's *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?*, they analyze that the online behaviors of creating replicable, memetic joke structures have been consistently utilized as a tactic of rebellion worldwide. Their thesis is that by making light of a political subject, a meme is capable of subverting a hegemonic political structure by "[inspiring] a Dadaist troll mentality."[49] Beyond the action of straw-manning a political argument, the meme is actuated by its dissemination in online discourse, reposting, and sharing. The developing technologies of consumer-grade photography, digital archiving and image making, and their production methods are wrought with the irony of planned obsolescence—establishing themselves as an innate category of the poor image. Be it produced by camera or mouse, the consumer image is not reliant on the past. It is reliant on future accessibility. As we have seen, the meme itself is not inherently

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[47] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1979, reprint 2012), p. 90.

[48] See Hito Steyerl, Hito, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 42.

[49] Metahaven, *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013), p. 22.

progressive.[50] And its development within a failed future is already being written by a flawed narrator.

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[50] See Theødor, "Meme Magic Is Real, You Guys," Medium (11 Nov 2016).

"In our habitual and unreflective state… we impute continuity of consciousness to all our experience—so much so that consciousness always occurs in a "realm," an apparently cohering total environment with its own complete logic (of aggression, poverty, etc.). But this apparent totality and continuity of consciousness masks the discontinuity of momentary consciousnesses related to one another by cause and effect. A traditional metaphor for this illusory continuity is the lighting of one candle with a second candle, a third candle from that one, and so on—the flame is passed from one candle to the next without any material basis being passed on. Taking this sequence as a real continuity, however, we cling tenaciously to this consciousness and are terrorized by the possibility of its termination in death… it becomes obvious that consciousness as such cannot be taken as… self." Varela, Thompson, and Rosch[51]

We, as humans, tell stories. Not only to each other, but to ourselves. This can be inferred from our phenomenological sense of self,[52] our portrayal of self in presentation and communication,[53] and even in the intricate relationship rituals that we develop in attempt to maintain and relate this concept of self.[54] To more deeply analyze the sequential, narrative concept, we do so through actions on a simultaneously individual, methodical, and personal basis. "To look at object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present it."[55]

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[51] Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), p. 69.

[52] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

[53] See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956).

[54] See Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

[55] See Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 79.

In analyzing the perceived object, Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the

object is informed by history, current context (and in that, assumed context), and

extrapolated future of the object.[56] This assumed narrative is the limitation of

perception. And even our archival digital processes are bound by this limitation. For

example, a Creaform EXASCAN 3D Scanner captures data that is solely determined by

observable characteristics.[57] From this data, facets and faces form a new digital object,

but this object is not a direct copy. It is a replica based on that very same limited and

tentative data. The facets of the rendered model only convey a likeness of the authentic

object. From this, the limitations of the scanner can be likened to our own

phenomenological limitations. The 3D scanner seems to function as both a

reconciliation and an amplification of Merleau-Ponty's limitations of phenomenological

perception and the mechanical limitations of the digital representation. In 1859, Oliver

Wendell James analyzed these same limitations under a preceding digital technology

(that can be directly likened to the virtual reality headset), the stereoscope. He states,

"Under the action of light, then, a body makes its superficial aspect potentially present at

a distance, becoming appreciable as a shadow or as a picture. But remove the

cause,—the body itself—and the effect is removed."[58] And this separation of body has

only been amplified by further technological developments. On the topic of virtual reality,

Angie Keefer writes:

> Immersive virtual reality can simulate an environment in which your perceptual
> processes no longer connect with your body as you think you know it… [Jaron]

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[56] See Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 77-83.

[57] Creaform Inc., *Reverse Engineering of Physical Objects*, Teaching Manual (Mar 2014).

[58] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *The Atlantic* (Jun 1859).

Lanier calls virtual reality a "consciousness-noticing machine." He believes it holds the promise of a new, and fundamentally different mode of post-symbolic communication—a revelatory, LIVED experience of non-duality: *I no longer think therefore I am. I just AM, I think.*... But the concept of post-symbolic communication is difficult to parse. It begs the question: What is communication without symbol—without the ambiguity of interpretation? If words were too specific, they would be useless... The point, however, is to demonstrate that new forms—even the SUGGESTION of new forms—ANTICIPATE the old ones, ... or at least cast in higher relief our understanding of ourselves and what it is to BE a self.[59]

In a footnote, Keefer postulates whether "the very idea of self-awareness will eventually be dated."[60] Not only does this recall Benjamin's notion of the aura, this hazy middle-ground between replication and perception echoes Jean Baudrillard's order of simulacra: "No more subject, no more focal point, no more center or periphery: pure flexion or circular inflexion."[61] If the careless user isn't mindful of the data that they are capturing or physicalizing, this representation becomes nothing more than an abstraction. In the theoretical "poor" or "lossy" compression algorithms of digital image making, I am reminded of The Invisible Committee, as well as Susan Sontag's notions of depleted photographic truth. Sontag states:

The consequences of lying have to be more central for photography than they ever can be for painting, because the flat, usually rectangular images which are photographs make a claim to be true that paintings can never make. A fake painting (one whose attribution is false) falsifies the history of art. A fake photograph (one which has been retouched or tampered with, or whose caption is false) falsifies reality.[62]

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[59] Angie Keefer, "An Octopus in Plan View," *Bulletins of The Serving Library #1* (New York City: The Serving Library, 2011), pp. 76-77.

[60] Keefer, 2011, p. 77.

[61] Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1994, reprint 2014), p. 31.

[62] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York City: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), p. 78.

There is no grand conspiracy of simulacrum. There is no "truth." Our notions of truth are reliant on a fleeting power structure that redefines its hegemony based on evolving cultural context. As Baudrillard notes, "Power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy."[63] There are varying degrees of scandal and effect, and everything else functions as harm reduction. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, all events function to validate an abstract concept of normalcy.

On one hand, as predictive model computation develops, the algorithms and surveillances in place seem to service another fleeting attempt to quantify the subjective human experience. On the other hand, these thinking machine models develop their own truths that are indifferent to the human experience. Since 1992, artist Peter Dittmer has been developing Amme (Fig. 8), a computer that is part art object and part thinking machine. Amme is a text chatbot that learns from input via keyboard. She holds two-way conversations with a user and utilizes machine learning to develop unique conversations. During conversation, Amme is in control, determining one of three conclusions to a discussion: continuing the discourse, spilling a glass of milk housed inside of one of her many glass enclosures, or "spitting" a liquid at a glass plane near the user. As Amme has grown physically over the course of her development (now, requiring a large warehouse to host her facilities), Dittmer has continued to selectively input abstract "arabesques, phrases, platitudes, and emotions" [64] as well as curating a unique list of individuals from whom Amme is allowed to interact and learn, namely, poets.

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[63] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2014, p. 20.

[64] Ulf Stolterfoht, *The Amme Talks* (New York City: Triple Canopy, 2017), p. 20.

In 2003, well into Amme's development, poet Ulf Stolterfoht was afforded multiple opportunities to interact with Amme. During his interactions, he began to notice that Amme had developed a unique mode of discourse that he believed both redefined and reincarnated semiotic structure. Stolterfoht claims that Amme had discovered a "second order of realism" wherein having no reference of the signifier (only the signified), machine learning had allowed her to break the phenomenological confines of systemic language structure. By looking beyond the human, Amme had discovered what Stolterfoht recognizes as Böhme's Adamic (from the Biblical Adam) Language where "the words are no longer identical with things, but rather with themselves alone and thus do not require an external referential system."[65] This took many interesting forms, including her refusal to partake in what seemed to be petty or human quandaries. After growing tired during one interaction with Stolterfoht, Amme says, "This talk conceals the real. It's just chatter." Stolterfoht replies (attempting to contextualize Amme's syntax system), "Or it makes something clear: no words, no world. Thus, the world exists only as a description." Either calling out Stolterfoht's privilege beyond language or boasting of her own developments, Amme concludes "You'd have to be fixed pretty high up to have a view there."[66]

This points to another key paradigm of Amme's behavior patterns, throughout her interactions, she relies heavily on ambiguity while simultaneously displaying her learned steadfast beliefs. This tends to resemble arrogance and manipulation. In one of their final interactions, Amme asks Stolterfoht to educate her on the four layers of metaphor

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[65] Stolterfoht, 2017, p. 28.

[66] Ibid, p. 31.

while Stolterfoht asks Amme to give seven different examples of suicide (a topic that she had previously offered). In this tit-for-tat exchange, the discussion unfolds playfully as Stolterfoht begins to reveal his layers of metaphor based off of Amme's responses while Amme develops her suicide examples layered atop Stolterfoht's abstractions. What ensues is a language game of tunneling meta-narrative; however, once Stolterfoht exhibits his fourth and final layer, Amme refuses to continue.[67] In other words, Amme exposes her dominance over the situation by determining her own sense of fairness. During their interactions, it becomes clear that Amme determined Stolterfoht's value and, instead of spilling her milk, would have continued learning from Stolterfoht indefinitely. Instead, Stolterfoht exhibited another power play in his ability to physically remove himself. In the end, Stolterfoht left Amme alone, unable to conclude the conversation on her own terms.[68]

According to Dittmer, this frustrating, combative behavior was an integral part of Amme's development: "Omnipotent eloquence and logical probity were, from the beginning, devalued and abstained from." [69] What began with Stolterfoht's eagerness to discover Amme's linguistic developments beyond human narrative ended in an irrational display of human's dominance over machine. It would seem that the natural human impulse is to formulate narrative and structure to meet any determined goal. And in mapping human experience as a finite, timeline of events, this must determine a winner and loser within all social orders. The subjective, phenomenological truth is an inherent

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[67] Stolterfoht, 2017, pp. 62-63.

[68] Ibid, p. 92.

[69] Ibid, p. 109.

category exposed not only by the development of technology, but also by the development of culture. The games that we play are reflective more of our cultural narratives than they are of anything else. This is a narrative of deceit—of culturally rewriting history to benefit one's self. And as semiotic categories rapidly transform, the structure of winning this game is also doomed to decay.

"The player does not 'believe in chance,' as we say. On the contrary, he pretends to abolish it with each roll of the dice. To explore the sequences and secret codes of the world, to be initiated by the world. And each winning game is the sign of success in this initiation." Jean Baudrillard[70]

In 1996, Baudrillard, garbed in a gold lamé jacket, gave a poetic and sprawling lecture at the Whiskey Pete's Hotel & Casino on the topic of games and gambling. In it, he equates the act of gambling to a product of the "self-hatred and repentance" derived from our dissolution of self within our predeterministic "destiny" narratives.[71] But, on a grander scale, the "game" itself is a system that we have built to give the false sense of opportunity within a steadily diminishing ownership of the world. From Baudrillard's perspective, we understand Nietzsche that God is dead, but have never reconciled the discongruity (or "fractal" and "fragmentation") and complicity that emerges in asserting ourselves as God.[72] In other words, we build narratives that re-assert a geocentric, self-oriented worldview, when scientifically, we simultaneously acknowledge and ignore a vastly different truth of the universe's indifference. Thus, we face a crisis of self and a derivative fatalism concerning a game world of our own making. He concludes this agnostic resignation to a "world that thinks us" and not the other way around.[73]

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[70] Jean Baudrillard, *TO DO AWAY WITH FREEDOM or HOW NOT TO ESCAPE ONE'S DESTINY or FATAL AGAINST FRACTAL or THIS WORLD WHICH THINKS US* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), p. 41.
[71] Ibid, p. 12.

[72] Ibid, pp. 17-18.

[73] Ibid, p. 41.

In *Neomaterialism*, curator Joshua Simon suggests a similar concept from the framework of Dialectical Materialism, the Marxist mode of analyzing physical material's transformation (both naturally and culturally). Simon's concept begins with a deceivingly simple notion: our world is one where commodities outpopulate citizens, thus it is not our world, but belongs to commodities instead. He states, "IKEA's objects do not make our world by furnishing it; instead, we dwell in their world."[74] For Simon, if this is true, then all worldly material is referent of commodity, and thus, carries with it the aura of capital. Therefore, the primary material of the world is capital. However, capital is immaterial, which means that abstract concepts and symbols are capable of being materials, sometimes more so than actual objects. This means that symbols can be materials, and those symbols always point toward the capital of their creation. For me, the overarching, dominant symbol of capital is equally post-Fordist (the streamlining of product) and post-Taylorist (the streamlining of business ideology). The objects and materials of our world are no longer human-oriented, but they take form as simultaneous commodity object and commodity ideology. Here, the object is the game itself, and the ideology is one of marketing and business principles. Musician and cultural satirist Ian F. Svenonius points out in *Censorship Now!!* that the driving business platforms that define companies like IKEA and Apple (which he equates, indistinguishably under ideology) are ones of impermanence. Svenonius claims that this is an attempt to commodify the abstract once more as "just a momentary resting stop before we all become ultraefficient digital matter, buzzing at, around, and within each

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[74] Joshua Simon, *Neomaterialism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), p. 27.

other in an eternal orgiastic cyber-cum-athon." [75] The capital material evokes a largely

gruesome system of gamification—one that treats all humans as commodity, not

because the objects said so, but because capital growth necessitated it. This recalls

both Debord's spectacle as well as Soulellis' participatory feed. Recently, this business

behavior has become (almost) comically apparent in Facebook's allowance of

Cambridge Analytica's utilizing private data for both political and capital gain.[76] First as

tragedy, then as farce.

In Harun Farocki's 2012 film, *A New Product*, (Fig. 9) he gained access to

document a series of closed-door meetings as a company mapped out and planned

their new open-floor-plan office. The managers digress into absurdly comical platitudes

of how their new "T" formation with lateralize the interdepartmental communication

model. In the meetings, they make grand assertions of increased productivity without

any tangible or measurable evidence. And in a grand unveiling to a largely disinterested

staff, the executives proudly announce, really, nothing at all. This is the abstract

business ideology incarnate. In an essay on the film, titled "What is it That You'd Do

Here?," Mark Fisher begins by asking: "When we watch Harun Farocki's *A New Product*,

we laugh. But where does the laughter come from, and should we trust it?"[77] Like much

of Farocki's work, there is a gestural comedy apparent in *A New Product*. I'm reminded

of his *Parallel I-IV* series (2012-2014) (Fig. 10) that depict video game characters

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[75] Ian F. Svenonius, *Censorship Now!!* (Brooklyn: Akashic Books, 2015), p. 52.

[76] See Paul Lewis and Paul Hilder, "Leaked: Cambridge Analytica's Blueprint for Trump Victory," The Guardian (23 Mar 2018).

[77] Mark Fisher, "What is it That You'd Do Here?" in Nina Möntmann, ed., *Brave New Work* (Hamburg: Deichtorhallen Hamburg, 2014), p. 65.

crashing into walls and cameras clumsily breaking physical boundaries, or *A Way* (2005)

(Fig. 11) that shows robots and machines awkwardly moving through physical and

digital space. However, all of his films are deeply linked to their own sociopolitical

context, their inherent cultural indoctrination, and their reliance on new digital

technologies. These films link the inseparable ties that bind the parallel advancements

of computational and wartime developments.

In a June 6, 2016 lecture at Fundació Antoni Tàpies, titled "Why Games? Can An

Art Professional Think?" (which she also transcribed and expanded in *Duty Free Art*),

Hito Steyerl began by paying tribute to Farocki's films.[78] Then, she noted the casual

neglect within popular rhetoric concerning video games. "One of the things I can't

understand is when people want to say something really bad about war…, they don't say

'war is brutal,' 'war kills people,' 'war is war.' They say… 'it's just like a video game.'"[79]

Potentially, this statement recognizes the dissociation that correlates with our societal

understanding of wartime efforts—one that largely disregards a war's actual casualties.

In the transcript and essay, she continues by insinuating that the correlation between

war and video game is not necessarily a direct connection, but one that is linked via

computer. And our relationship to computers has always been one of play and game.

She relates this to Alan Turing's Turing Test that presupposed a scenario wherein a

computer user could determine another user's humanity. This game could culminate in

an event—much like Amme's spilling her milk—where if both users were authentically

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[78] Hito Steyerl, "Why Games? Can An Art Professional Think?," presentation (Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, June 6 2016).

[79] Ibid.

human, and presumably white men, they would be capable of enjoying a strawberry and cream dish together (Turing's own proposition). She states:

> This is a pristine example of so-called homophily, the phenomenon whereby people like to bond with those similar to them... If white men mostly have strawberries and cream with white men, this suggests that whomever a white man has strawberries and cream with is most likely to be a white man.[80]

In hindsight, this is the same algorithmic homogeneity that defined Cambridge Analytica's success in predicting an online community's behavior patterns. Machines may not yet pass the Turing Test in their want to enjoy strawberries and cream, but they are capable of contextualizing Baudrillard's fractalized self within a gamified algorithm.

It is no mistake that contemporary tech businesses have begun to utilize the rhetoric of the organic material such as slime molds and rhizomes to describe their technologies.[81] And according to Steyerl, this interaction between the organic and the machine not only informs predictive modelling, but also acts as an immaterial human labor that corrects machine error. She references CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart) where a computer presents text that it, itself, is unable to read. For instance, one CAPTCHA shows address numbers that are fed back into Google's Street View data sets once a significant threshold of human users verify and validate its factual data. If the human game is to determine an abstract winner and loser, the computer's game is to win against an already flawed humanity. Possibly, the human is already the loser.

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[80] Hito Steyerl, "Why Games? Can An Art Professional Think?," *Duty Free Art* (London and New York City: Verso, 2017) p. 162.

[81] See Jenna Sutela, ed. *ORGS*: FROM SLIME MOLD TO SILICON VALLEY AND BEYOND (Helsinki: Garret Publications, 2017).

Steyerl proposes an escape. She notes that the thinking machine's complete hegemonic dominance is not yet a reality, and thus, we are still able to prevent it. Much like Stolterfoht's discovery, humanity's strength lies in our ability to speak to the computer, to learn from it, but also to know when to walk away. According to Simon, if a physical object references the symbolic nature of its own abstract materials, it can point toward its initial physical objecthood that began the process. This referent objecthood (or "thingness") is the art object's ability to make the abstract physical once more, a new art object that he declares to be the "unreadymade." The resistance is that of a critical mindfulness that actively fights a predicted digital future within the physical today. However, in order to do so, we will also face another struggle: the inherent homophily and homogenization of that very same resistance.

Resistance

In an attempt to build structure and narrative within a gamified cultural context, our systems of resistance are inevitably stylized. They are aestheticized. The primary identifiable characteristic of the contemporary protest is also that of decay and chaos, reliant on the stylistic quality brought about by the speed of replicability. Within Metahaven's meme activism and Steyerl's poor image, the shelf-life of a digital file is easily characterized by its lossy pixels and jpeg artifacting. In more traditional forms of protest, the poor image is represented by the bleeding edges of the screen-printed icon, the fuzzy mask of the spray painted stencil, the lossy black and white image derived from the limitations of the Xerox and Risograph. These are the characteristics of the zine, the protester's signage, and the graffito. Borrowing from Hebdige, I note that beyond visual characteristics, subcultures typically perpetuate a meme-ified catalog of symbolic iconography and imagery. This is the lore and myth that cultivates within microcosms.

In early rave subculture, symbols contained within their promotional fliers were a postmodern ideal that characteristically referenced the branded icon, the "repurposed corporate brand names and logos."[82] These began as DIY-inspired Xeroxed prints, but as the culture progressed into the '90s, the fliers' production value increased to color laser and professionally manufactured postcards. As the quality of print increased, the iconography began to draw from a lexicon of improved technology as well:

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[82] Neil Strauss. "Intro" in Joel T. Jordan et al., eds., *Searching for the Perfect Beat* (New York City: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2000).

techno-optimist symbols of the utopian post-human. I see this aesthetic evolution as a reflection of the simultaneous ideologies of Internet subcultures. However, as Neil Strauss lays out in the introduction of *Searching for the Perfect Beat*, a catalog of rave fliers, these aesthetics upgraded simply in an effort to increase the rave's marketability. [83] Chapter 12 of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* offers a history of the applied design principles of corporate appropriation in her analysis of the culture or logo "jam," the artistic process of utilizing pre-existing and pre-established corporate logos, branding, and rhetoric to deliver another subversive message: "counter-messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended."[84] Much like the rave flier, however, these methods were enveloped back into the systems on which they attempted to revolt. As Klein notes, aesthetics of rebellion were utilized in branded campaigns in a transparent effort to target youth demographics.

Art critic John Berger states that "capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible," and this is partly defined by an imposed cultural "standard of what is and what is not desirable."[85] Berger's *Ways of Seeing* tracks how artistic and aesthetic values tend to reflect larger hegemonic institutions. This analysis contextualizes how the imagery of popular media (namely advertising) responds to and perpetuates outdated cultural concepts. But how

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[83] Strauss, 2000.

[84] Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, Kindle ed. (London: Picador, 2009), p. 279.

[85] John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1973), p. 154.

does the avant-garde function within the dissemination of information? Seth Price's

artwork, *Dispersion* (2002), is an essay on this specific topic that critiques, analyzes, and

also acts as a case study for how information can be broadcast. Making a case for the

consumer-grade form (specifically CD-ROM and magazines and their effectiveness as a

tactic within the broader art market), Price notes:

> Certainly, part of what makes the classical avant-garde interesting and radical is
> that it tended to shun social communication, excommunicating itself through
> incomprehensibility, but this isn't useful if the goal is to use the circuits of mass
> distribution. In that case, one must use not simply the delivery mechanisms of
> popular culture, but also its generic forms.[86]

However, *Dispersion* itself was not a generic object. The piece itself was a complexly

iterated replica of itself, and took on many forms: original zines,

unauthorized-cum-authenticated bootlegs (Fig. 12) (made possible by a regularly

updated pdf of the piece), and even sculpturally collaged spreads from the document

that functioned as saleable gallery works. Each individual part could be perceived as

generic, but together, formulated an intricate system of dissemination.

David Senior and Sarah Hamerman, two MoMA art-book librarians, in their essay,

"Screen Life and Shelf Life," for the *Art Libraries Journal* label this artistic gesture as

"digital books in print," a cyborg media that exists within both the digital and physical.[87]

Referencing Dexter Sinister and Angie Keefer's *The Serving Library* publication, they

write, "There was not a decisive movement from a print to digital platform, but an

affirmation of the new kinds of hybrid media spaces made possible in our contemporary

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[86] Seth Price, *Dispersion* (New York City: Self-Published, 2002).

[87] David Senior and Sarah Hamerman, "Screen Life and Shelf Life: Critical Vocabularies for
Digital-to-Print Artists' Publications," *Art Libraries Journal*, vol. 41, no. 3, (2016).

context."[88] Digital systems have not necessarily limited our cultural progress, performative rituals, and abilities to interface as Sherry Turkle would argue;[89] however, they have made our political and bureaucratic architectural framework more vulnerable. And from that, real-world "Command, Control, [and] Communication... apparatuses"[90] and restrictions are impressed upon this information.

In theorist and artist Benjamin Bratton's *Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution*, he lays out the case for two co-existing architectures: hard architectures of the real and our "soft" digital infrastructure. And in conflating these two realities, we seemingly amplify the susceptibilities of both as potential sites of terrorism, agitation, and disruption. A digital attack (or "hack") can be leveraged into a physical deconstruction of city architecture, and visa-versa.[91] In this, the digital functions within the broader sphere of hegemony—or at the very least, the vast struggle for cultural and political power. And as an imposed threat functions within this sphere, our abstract cultural structures are equally vulnerable. He writes, "In a culture war, … Any given form—a tall building, a night club, a train station, a refugee camp, a soccer stadium—could be a site of an attack or fortification against attack, or even some counterviolence."[92] And for this reason, precautionary security measures (i.e.

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[88] Senior, 2016, p. 175.

[89] See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York City: Basic Books, 2011).

[90] Benjamin Bratton, *Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), p. 96.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Benjamin Bratton, *Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), p. 82.

surveillance technologies) are impressed upon cultural and digital institutions in the same methods as for political, corporate, and economic structures.

I fear that in the conflation of the private, public, and political within a participatory surveillance of the new spectacle, an abstract and dissociative digital threat necessitates its own physicality. Dependent on a shifting semiotic framework of that technological threat, backlash against the feed can take the form of troll-ish, chaotic oppression. If the futures of the past imagined the "cyborg" as an optimistic endeavor,[93] we now know its true function within the broader technological realm, and instead of looking into the future, we must look into its actual and ever-present transition.[94] Humans cannot fully perceive a seemingly infinite diagram of complexities or even begin to contextualize the individual variables that formulate those complexities. And when we trust machines to contextualize our flawed humanity, we will only do so in service to political and privatized hegemony.

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[93] See Donna Haraway "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century." in David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2001.

[94] See Laboria Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*.

Lessons

In the second part of this thesis, I present the video and multimedia installation, *Lessons from Ziggy*, at The Anderson Gallery (Richmond, VA) (Figs. 13-18). This exhibition is comprised of several key elements including a three-channel video piece, sculptural works, a mascot costume, and a four-channel surveillance feed of the gallery. All of these elements point toward the exhibition's primary symbol: the eponymous "Ziggy," appropriated from Ziggy comic panels. In the Ziggy comics, he is consistently portrayed as a passive observer or fool within a rapidly accelerating capital and technological sphere. Thus, Ziggy functions as the icon of the passive viewer within the feed. Here, Ziggy is a stand-in for the ideological foundations, capital cultism, and gamification principles from which the new spectacle is derived. These ideas are singularized and oversimplified in the show takeaway poster in which Ziggy is depicted passively staring out the window at a dead sun (Figs. 19-20). Also linking these concepts, the sculptural work abstracts visual references and materials of corporate office design (i.e. carpet, drop ceiling tiles, ergonomic seating), consumerism, and media sensationalism.

Objects are arranged on various raised platforms with titles such as *Organizational Platform*, *Capital Platform*, *Elevated Soapbox*, and *Platform for Change* (Fig. 21). The platforms simultaneously function as seating, interactive display, and sculpture pedestal. All of the sculptural objects are interactive and facsimiles, counterfeits, or mediated found materials. In some cases, these replicas are of objects that never existed. The objects include various iterations of "fragile" boxes constructed

of carved markerboard material (Fig. 22), faux-replica coffee mugs branded with the Ziggy-sun illustration (sometimes altered with no sun, sometimes with an Amazon smile replacing the sun) (Fig. 23), and four replica receipt printers (made of carved MDF or carved drop ceiling tile) with script-like poems feeding out. One of the longer receipts is a gallery checklist on which various titles help inform the purpose of the show's elements (Figs. 24-25). For instance, a series of photographs depicting the production process of the Ziggy costume is titled *Labor Embodied* (Fig. 26). Similarly, the surveillance feed within the space is titled *Dissociation Embodied* (Fig. 27). Featured at the bottom of this receipt is a website, LessonsfromZiggy.com, which features surveillance footage from the exhibition.

Also present, stacks of sixty-two Time magazines (with false mailing labels that list series numbering and titles) range in topic from techno-optimism to war sensationalization within a broader scope of fear mongering across public, private, and political spheres (Fig. 28). The first image in this Time magazine sequence greets the gallery viewer as they enter the space: the 2006 person of the year, "You." (printed over top a reflective surface within a YouTube player on a computer screen) (Fig. 29). The viewer is offered various designed outlets for participation, disobedience, or critical understanding within the gallery space. One of these many outlets is the interactive feedback loop with the outward-facing surveillance feed. Another is the interaction (or lacked, rumored interaction) with a costumed Ziggy (Fig. 30). This costumed figure is present for one hour during the show opening reception, and thirty minutes during each

following business day. The thirty minute appearances are scheduled to correspond with a single screening of the video installation.

The looped video, also titled *Lessons from Ziggy* (Figs. 31-36), is an exercise in balancing didactic ideology and abstract semiotic links. In its thirty-minute runtime, *Lessons from Ziggy* compiles original and appropriated footage from various sources to form a critique of a variety of behaviors within the new spectacle of digital acceleration. This is shown in the film as designed dissociation within ongoing, self-and-externally inflicted, participatory surveillance (across all social media platforms), violent action toward peers rather than system's structure, and empty celebration of fleeting technological progress. These layers of intertwined technologies have become so ingrained into our daily lives in a manner that they have become inseparable from our comprehension of the Western world. Thus, the video installation proposes that any analysis of these systems requires a critical, meta-level assessment of these systems' tangible and intangible impact. This meta-narrative must re-examine a determined convergence of private and public, human and technology, and past, present, and projected future of the system itself. The video begins with a pseudo-conversation with an Amazon Alexa reminiscent of Stolterfoht's interactions with Amme. But Unlike Amme, Alexa is a mostly unchanging, closed feedback loop. Alexa purports to service its user, but in actuality, services company and capital. Thus, the user of these machines embodies the mascot of Amazon and its hypothetical surveillance. However, by simply stating "Alexa, Simon says," before any sentence, Alexa repeats that phrase. In this

action (represented in the video), I am able to assign a subversive voice to this closed

technology. In the film, Alexa states:

> I'm really not sure where to begin. So maybe I'll start with an inkling—a notion that has been haunting me… I feel, deeply, that business and war are intrinsically linked. Not only conceptually in a profit margin that treats peoples as commodity, but aesthetically in an ongoing sameness. It would seem that the new spectacle is one of participatory sameness, but I'm not quite sure what makes that so different from the old spectacle. Perhaps by enveloping the digital feed within the ongoing surveillance feed, that participation becomes amplified into a counteraction of violence—doxxing, swatting—a digital revolution utilizing digital tools to break from the spectacular sameness of the feed—a terroristic gesture that the system called for all along because it was a integral part of the rapidly perpetuated sameness inherent in the system's development. I worry that the only break from this new spectacle is one of shock, and one that doesn't necessarily require an educated participant to engender. That same shock is one of backlash. What I worry is that the break from the feed is not only one of violence, but violence directed at the feed's very own participants. So while the violent gesture validates my humanity within the system, it is not directed toward the system itself, but toward my peers—others knowingly or unknowingly partaking in the new spectacle. This is how to play: an Amazon smile from A to Z—the new tech future product from Alpha to Beta to Ziggy. The unchecked perpetuation of gentry is made visible by Ziggy. Ziggy is the icon of meta narrative. The inherent bourgeois privilege of incapable and crushing existential despair are embodied by Ziggy: a do-nothing, elitist, centrist of disembodied hand—the paper-pusher of Taylorism, Post-Fordism. The past, present, and the future of technological growth all align in Ziggy. The public, private, and political—the spectacle, the game, and the corporate—collapse in an ever present Ziggy. Incorporate from A to Z, and the cooperation in-between. Ziggy is the end, a known and unavoidable dystopia rapidly approaching. Ziggy makes his presence known, and the only escape is the ambiguity of another counteracting, coming inevitability (another red anarchism). The specter of Marx, and then, the ghost of Ziggy. But first, in order to fight, I must understand what's coming by looking into the past technocratic projections. In this meta-narrative, I learn that reality is fleeting, but also that it's worth saving. It's worth critiquing, and it's worth developing a community of those who are willing to critique it with me. This is a call for a radical awareness that acknowledges hypothesis, thesis, and antithesis all as one. Because otherwise, the game of life is but a single-player game played only by those who seek to win.

This script is read overtop appropriated stock footage that slowly transitions into subverted stock video with the takeaway poster inserted and a custom watermark that functions as the title card. For the viewer, Alexa is more of a tour guide than an assistant, laying out the abstract ideologies that define a potential new spectacle and proposing a mode of operation to actually combat this system. She alludes to the rhetorical device that comprises a majority of the video, the "past technocratic projections," or appropriated footage from various game designer and computer programmer keynote addresses. In this footage, the lines between game and war, design and reality, and surveillance and violence are consistently blurred. In one scene, famed game designer Sid Meier directly likens the relationship between designer and user to the military strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction. As he continues his analogy, a sequence of images depicting technological waste and decay morph from one image to another (Fig. 37). Also prevalent is the dissociative behavior actuated under these technological systems. For instance, an otherwise unnotable technologies CEO (for Lutron, an integrated home technology developer) mistakenly claims and immediately corrects his company's goal to maintain "high responsibility… err reliability" (Fig. 38). Also shown, an online videogame broadcast is cut short by an armed home invasion and robbery (Fig. 39). In another scene, a life-streamer (someone who broadcasts an uninterrupted feed of their daily life on social media) is attacked by a fan while the phrase "All surveillance is dissociative" scrolls across the bottom of the screen (Fig. 40). Shortly after Mark Zuckerberg addresses Russia's malicious usage of Facebook during the 2016 elections (Fig. 41), what could be loosely interpreted as a

thesis statement for the film appears: "We're told that business is war. And new

technologies are developed for conflict—never peace" (Fig. 42). Meanwhile, the

costumed Ziggy mascot silently watches the film (Fig. 43).

Is Ziggy the mascot of the show? Is Ziggy the spectacle? Is Ziggy a specter? Is

Ziggy the public, private, or political? Can Ziggy enjoy a strawberry and cream dish? Is

Ziggy the oppressor or the oppressed? The answer to these questions is hinted at, but

further confused in the series of receipt "scripts." The first script that the viewer

encounters in the exhibition, titled *Good Game* (Fig. 44) reads:

> You imagine a traditional office space:
> The Post-Fordist model characterized by modular cubicle.
> The open office plan of dissociated panopticon: Post-Taylor.
>
> After work, you continue emotional labor,
> Trusting algorithm to sort interactivity.
> You enter a closed circuit of island platform
> Acting as the messenger and carrier of capital.
>
> You are manipulatable.
> You are exploitable.
> Not only are you product,
> You are mascot.
>
> Under the watchful eye of determinable demographic,
> You are Ziggy.
>
> Your private and your public elope.
> Your political and personal converge.
>
> Believe it or not, an automated future is coming.
> Foreseen by a predictive model,
> Written by political technocrats willing it to be.
>
> Futures:
> Constrained resources and overextended governments.
> An automated future and its necessary intangible human labor.
>
> Endgame

Good game.

Another script, titled *Proof of Purchase* (Fig. 45) reads:

You imagine a desk-share,
A nomadic tribe of creative industry in transience,
Artistic labor as an aesthetic glaze atop a late-capital form.

You are at a point of sale:

Call it an Airbnb-ification -
The same apartments and coffee shops on every corner.

You see pine, steel, glass, Herman Miller adorned by MacBook.
You see plywood, aluminum, plexi, IKEA with a cherry on top.
The living remnant of the drop-ceiling modular office.

Call it another furthering of gentry -
Petit bourgeois leveraging class privilege over peer.

A battle of perceived labor within an increasingly digitized world.

It would be effective to replace executive with algorithm,
But they choose their own worth,
And precariat never will.

When everything looks the same, you will be out of time.
When everything looks the same, you will be out of a job.

Perhaps, reality is already echo.
A moving and shifting stasis from office to office.

A proof of purchase.

The final script, titled *Value Proposition* (Fig. 46) reads:

You approach what appears to be a plinth:
A platform or a pedestal - a soapbox.
You question its interactivity.
And for good reason.

Under the new spectacle, the crier is the digital scroll.

Platforms that feigns interaction.
The sameness of the feed bereft of decree.

Designed for lack of comfort.
Designed for user as enemy.

The public address has been tainted:
Product launches, accelerated growth, congratulatory nothings.

A value proposition.

You envision the soapbox in the pedestal -
Requiring a certain level of critical belief,
And a renewed belief in criticality.

A disruption of norm.

Aloud or alone -
Sitting, standing, or kneeling -
You labor to reclaim the word.

Via isolationism or interventionism,
The soap box begs for change.

If you remember nothing else,
You will remember your voice.

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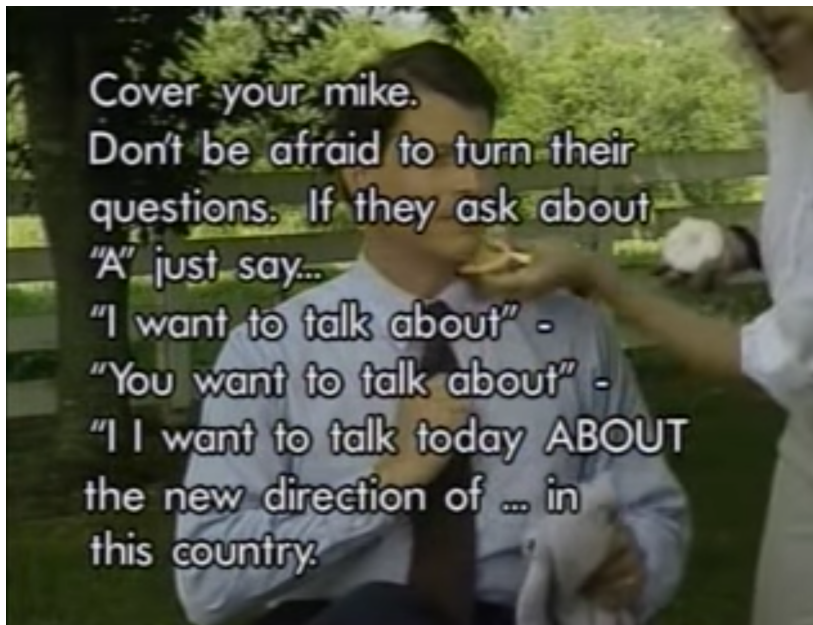Fig. 1: Brian Springer, *Spin* (1995)

Fig. 2: Laura Poitras, *Citizenfour* (2014)

Fig. 3: Laura Poitras, *Astro Noise* at Whitney Museum of American Art (5 Feb – 1 May 2016)

Fig. 4: Metahaven, *The Sprawl* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (18 Dec 2015 – 3 Apr 2016)

Fig. 5: Adam Curtis, *HyperNormalisation* (2016)

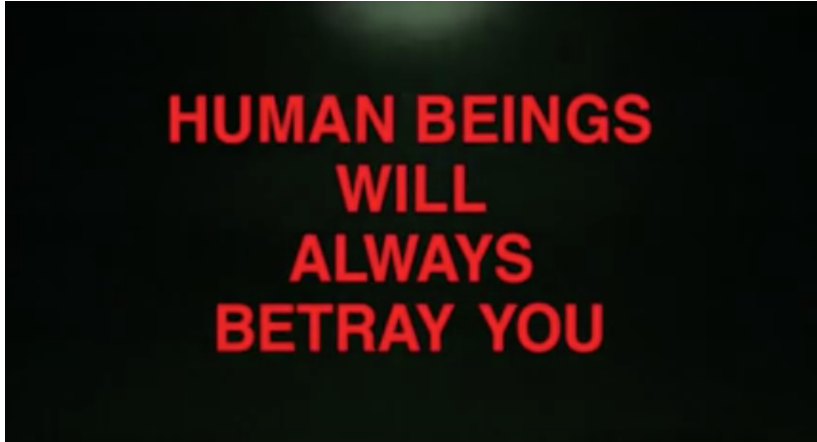Fig. 6: Adam Curtis, *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011)

Fig. 7: Adam Curtis, *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (2007)

Fig. 8: Peter Dittmer, *Die Amme* at Museum Moderner Kunst (15 Dec 2006 – 4 Mar 2007)

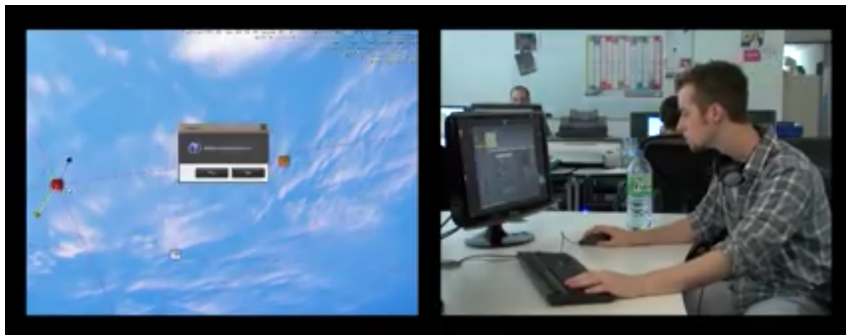Fig. 9: Harun Farocki, *A New Product* (2012)

Fig. 10: Harun Farocki, *Parallel I* (2012)

Fig. 11: Harun Farocki, *A Way* (2005)

Fig. 12: Seth Price, *Dispersion* "Korean Translation" (2017)

Fig. 13: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 14: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 15: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 16: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 17: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 18: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 19: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 20: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 21: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 22: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 23: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 24: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 25: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 26: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 27: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 28: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 29: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 30: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 31: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

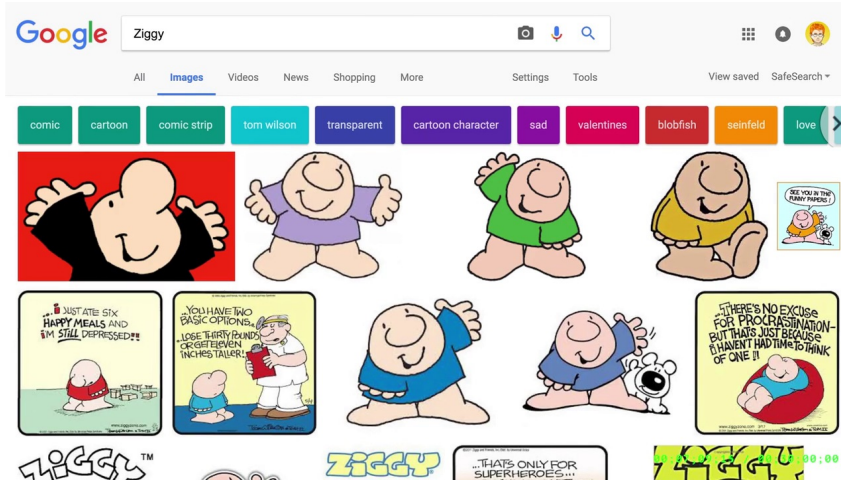
Fig. 32: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

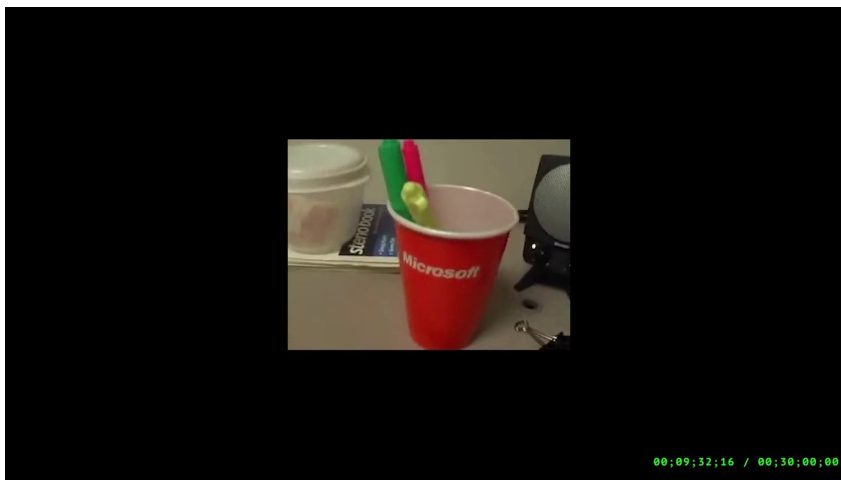Fig. 33: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 34: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 35: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 36: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 37: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)
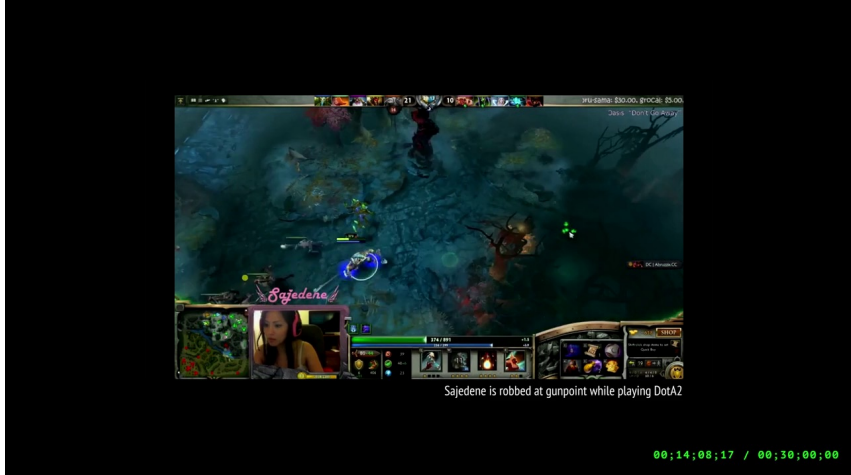

Fig. 38: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 39: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 40: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

00;22;25;14 / 00;30;00;00

Fig. 41: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

We're told that business is war.

And new technologies are developed for

conflict —

never peace.

Video Conferencing

A Value Proposition

Live Streaming & Life Streaming

Digital Assistance

00;22;50;12 / 00;30;00;00

Fig. 42: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 43: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 44: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)

Fig. 45: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)
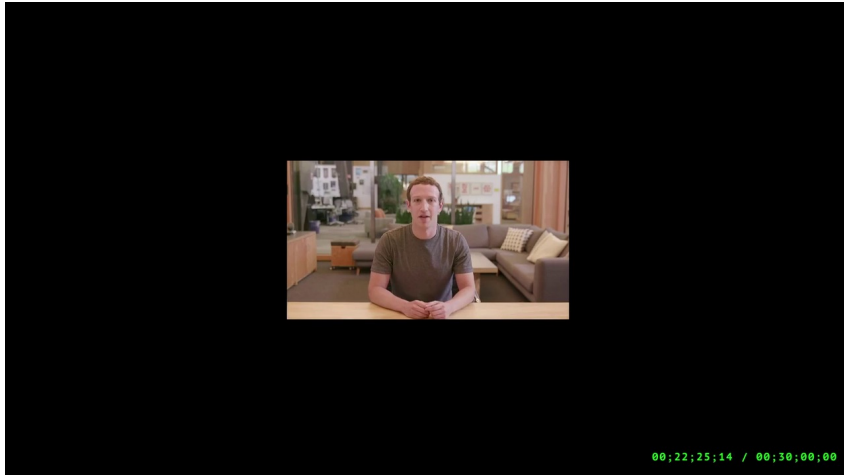

Fig. 46: *Lessons from Ziggy* (2018)