



LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

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What is the relationship between contemporary digital media and contemporary society? Is it possible to affirm that digital media are without sin and exist purely in a complex socio-political and economic context within which the users bring with them their ethical and cultural complexities? This issue, through a range of scholarly writings, analyzes the problems of ethics and sin within contemporary digital media frameworks.



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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC, VOLUME 19 ISSUE 4

Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

VOLUME EDITORS

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SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN

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NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

Post-Society: Data Capture and Erasure One Click at a Time

"Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!"

Frankenstein (1931)

They must have felt like gods at the NSA when they discovered that they were able to spy on anyone. What feels ridiculous to someone that works with digital media is the level of ignorance that people continue to have about how much everyone else knows or can know about 'you.' If only people were willing to pay someone, or to spend a bit of time searching through digital data services themselves, they would discover a range of services that have started to commercialize collective data: bought and sold through a range of semi-public businesses and almost privatized governmental agencies. Public records of infractions and crimes are available for 'you' to know what 'your' neighbor has been up to. These deals, if not outright illegal, are characterized by unsolved ethical issues since they are a 'selling' of state documents that were never supposed to be so easily accessible to a global audience.

Concurrently as I write this introduction, I read that the maddened Angela Merkel is profoundly shocked that her mobile phone has been tapped into – this is naive at best but also deeply concerning: since to not understand what has happened politically and technologically in the 21st century one must have been living on the moon. Perhaps it is an act or a pantomime staged for the benefit of those 'common' people that need to continue living with the strong

belief or faith that their lives are in good hands, that of the state.

Nevertheless it speaks of a 'madness' of the politician as a category. A madness characterized by an alienation from the rest of society that takes the form of isolation. This isolation is, in Foucauldian terms, none other than the enforcement of a voluntary seclusion in the prison and the mad house.

The prisons within which the military, corporate, financial and political worlds have shut themselves in speak increasingly of paranoia and fear. As such the voluntary prison within which they have sought refuge speaks more and more the confused language that one may have imagined to hear from the *Stultifera Navis*.

Paranoia, narcissism and omnipotence, all belong to the delirium of the sociopaths, who push towards the horizon, following the trajectory set by the 'deranged minds.'

It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks.

This otherworldliness – this being an alien from another world – has increasingly become the characteristic of contemporary political discourse, which, detached from the reality of the 'majority' of people, feeds into the godlike complex. Foolishness and lunacy reinforce this perspective, creating a rationale that drives the

Stultifera Navis towards its destiny inexorably, bringing all others with them.

Having segregated themselves in a prison of their own doing, the politicians look at all others as being part of a large mad house. It is from the upper deck of a gilded prison that politicians stir the masses in the lower decks into a frenzy of fear and obedience.

Why should it be in this discourse, whose forms we have seen to be so faithful to the rules of reason, that we find all those signs which will most manifestly declare the very absence of reason?

Discourses, and in particular political discourses, no longer mask the reality of madness and with it the feeling of having become omnipotent talks of human madness in its attempt to acquire the impossible: that of being not just godlike, but God.

As omnipotent and omniscient gods the NSA should allow the state to 'see.' The reality is that the 'hands' of the state are no longer functional and have been substituted with prostheses wirelessly controlled by the sociopaths of globalized corporations. The amputation of the hands happened while the state itself was merrily looking somewhere else, too blissfully busy counting the money that was flowing through neo-capitalistic financial dreams of renewed prosperity and Napoleonic grandeur.

The madness is also in the discourse about data, deprived of ethical concerns and rooted within perceptions of both post-democracy and post-state. So much so that we could speak of a post-data society, within which the current post-societal existence is the consequence of profound changes and alterations to an ideal way of living that technology – as its greatest sin – still presents as participatory and horizontal but not as plutocratic and hierarchical.

In order to discuss the present post-societal condition, one would need first to analyze the cultural disregard that people have, or perhaps have acquired, for their personal data and the increasing lack of participation in the alteration of the frameworks set for post-data.

This disregard for personal data is part of cultural forms of concession and contracting that are determined and shaped not by rights but through the mass loss of a few rights in exchange for a) participation in a product as early adopters (Google), b) for design status and appearance (Apple), c) social conventions and entertainment (Facebook) and (Twitter).

Big data offers an insight into the problem of big losses if a catastrophe, accidental or intentional, should ever strike big databases. The right of ownership of the 'real object' that existed in the data-cloud will become the new arena of post-data conflict. In this context of loss, if the crisis of the big banks has demonstrated anything, citizens will bear the brunt of the losses that will be spread iniquitously through 'everyone else.'

The problem is therefore characterized by multiple levels of complexity that can overall be referred to as a general problem of ethics of data, interpreted as the ethical collection and usage of massive amounts of data. Also the ethical issues of post-data and their technologies has to be linked to a psychological understanding of the role that individuals play within society, both singularly and collectively through the use of media that engender new behavioral social systems through the access and usage of big data as sources of information.

Both Prof. Johnny Golding and Prof. Richard Gere present in this collection of essays two perspectives that, by looking at taboos and the sinful nature of technology, demand from the reader a reflection on

the role that ethics plays or no longer plays within contemporary mediated societies.

Concepts of technological neutrality as well as economic neutrality have become enforced taboos when the experiential understanding is that tools that possess a degree of danger should be handled with a modicum of self-control and restraint.

The merging of economic and technological neutrality has generated corporate giants that have acquired a global stronghold on people's digital data. In the construction of arguments in favor or against a modicum of control for these economic and technological giants, the state and its political representatives have thus far considered it convenient not to side with the libertarian argument, since the control was being exercised on the citizen; a category to which politicians and corporate tycoons and other plutocrats and higher managers believe they do not belong to or want to be reduced to.

The problem is then not so much that the German citizens, or the rest of the world, were spied on. The taboo that has been infringed is that Angela Merkel, a head of state, was spied on. This implies an unwillingly democratic reduction from the NSA of all heads of state to 'normal citizens.' The disruption and the violated taboo is that all people are data in a horizontal structure that does not admit hierarchical distinctions and discriminations. In this sense perhaps digital data are violating the last taboo: anyone can be spied upon, creating a truly democratic society of surveillance.

The construction of digital data is such that there is not a normal, a superior, a better or a worse, but everything and everyone is reduced to data. That includes Angela Merkel and any other head of state. Suddenly the process of spying represents a welcome reduction to a basic common denominator: there is no

difference between a German head of state or a blue collar worker; the NSA can spy on both and digital data are collected on both.

If anything was achieved by the NSA it was an egalitarian treatment of all of those who can be spied upon: a horizontal democratic system of spying that does not fear class, political status or money. This is perhaps the best enactment of American egalitarianism: we spy upon all equally and fully with no discrimination based on race, religion, social status, political affiliation or sexual orientation.

But the term spying does not quite manifest the profound level of Panopticon within which we happen to have chosen to live, by giving up and squandering inherited democratic liberties one right at a time, through one agreement at a time, with one click at a time.

These are some of the contemporary issues that this new LEA volume addresses, presenting a series of writings and perspectives from a variety of scholarly fields.

This LEA volume is the result of a collaboration with Dr. Donna Leishman and presents a varied number of perspectives on the infringement of taboos within contemporary digital media.

This issue features a new logo on its cover, that of New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

My thanks to Prof. Robert Rowe, Professor of Music and Music Education; Associate Dean of Research and Doctoral Studies at NYU, for his work in establishing this collaboration with LEA.

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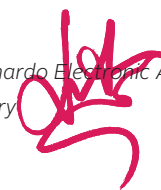
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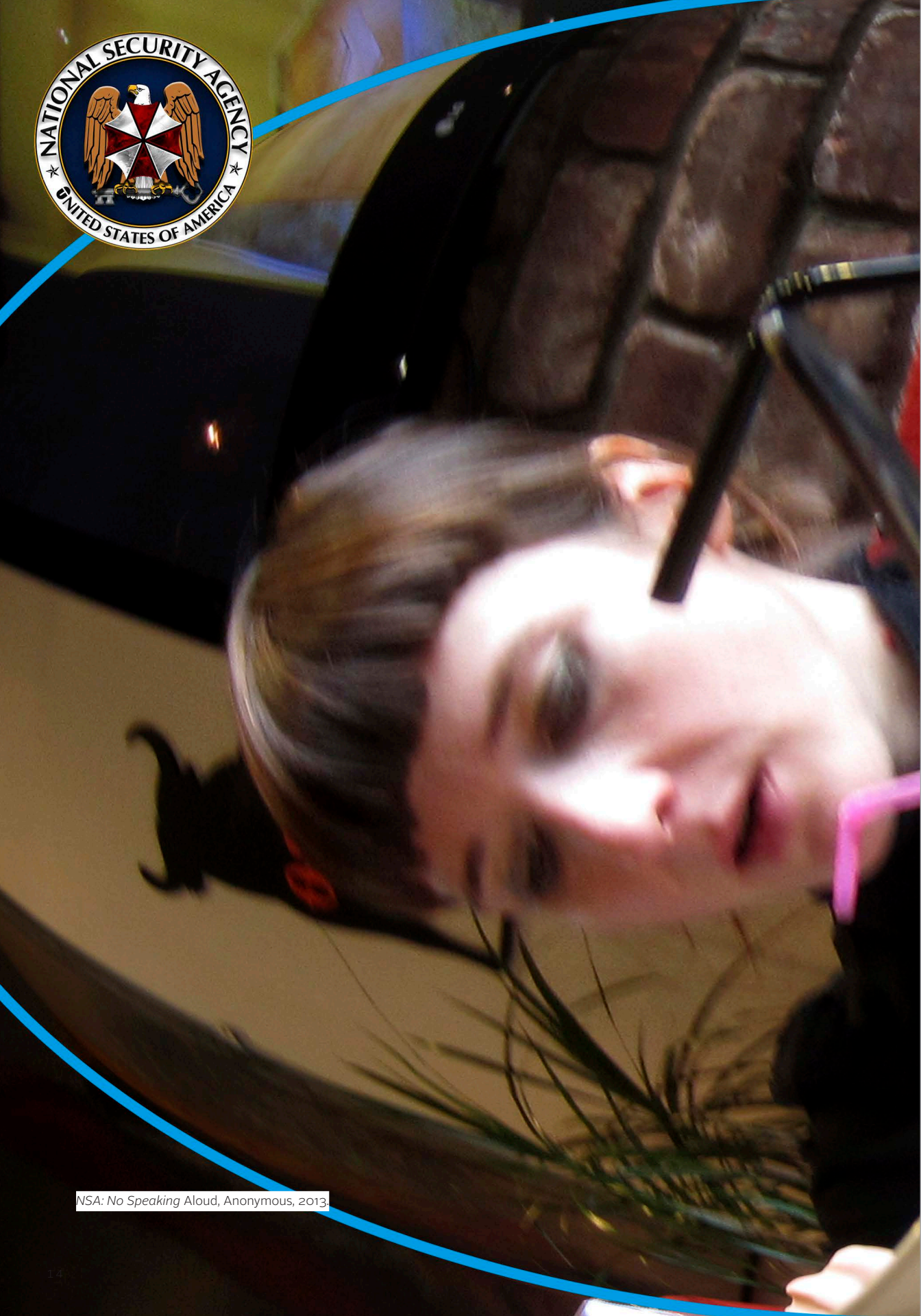
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Lanfranco Aceti

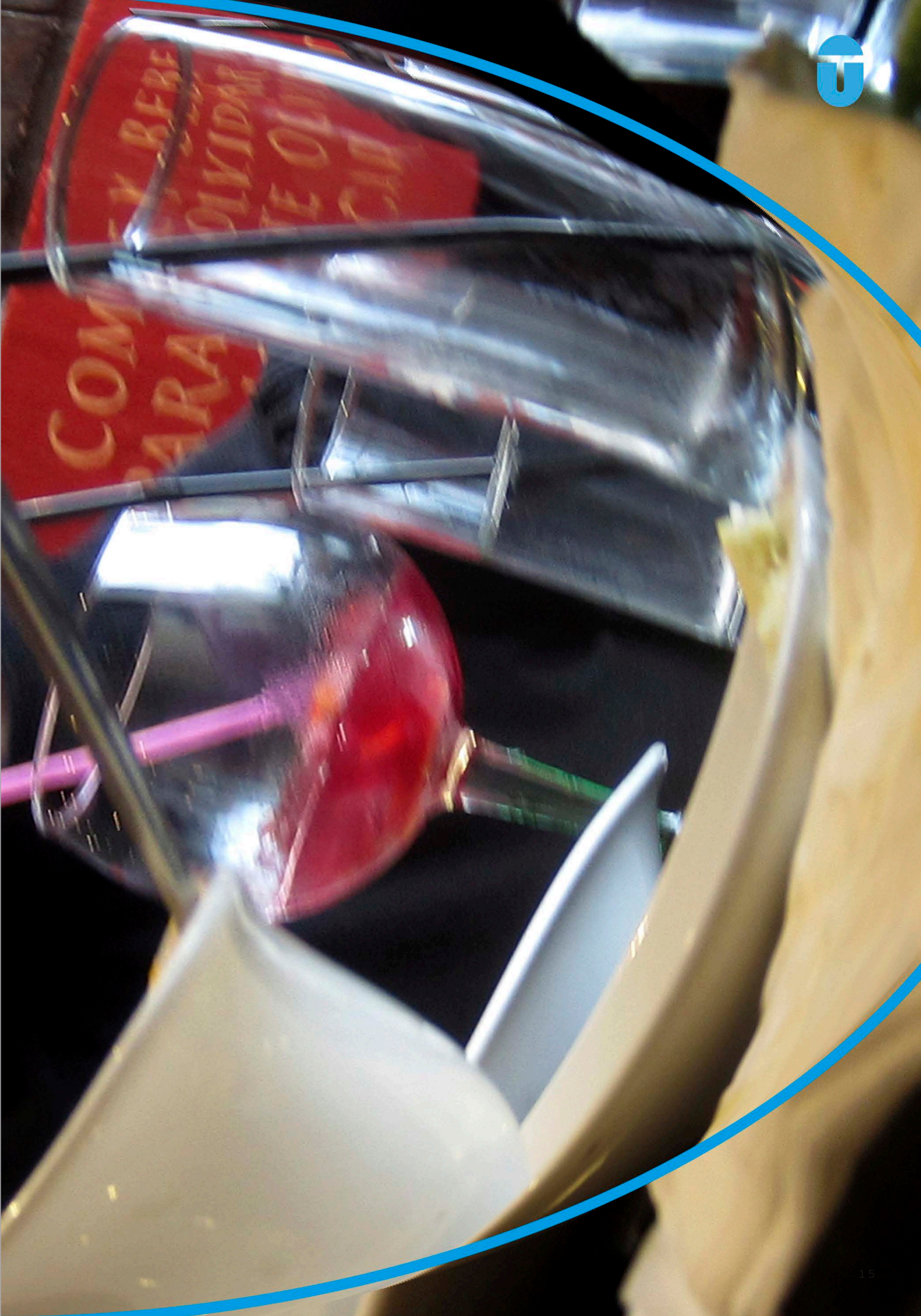
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1. Clive R. Boddy, "The Corporate Psychopaths Theory of the Global Financial Crisis," *Journal of Business Ethics* 102, no. 2 (2011): 255.
 2. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.
 3. *Ibid.*, 101.



NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.



Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

INTRODUCTION

“Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media” is both the title of this special edition and the title of a panel that was held at ISEA 2011. The goal of the panel was to explore the disinhibited mind's ability to exercise freedom, act on desires and explore the taboo whilst also surveying the boarder question of the moral economy of human activity and how this translates (or not) within digital media. The original panelists (some of whom have contributed to the this edition) helped to further delineate additional issues surrounding identity, ethics, human socialization and the need to better capture/understand/perceive how we are being affected by our technologies (for good or bad).

In the call for participation, I offered the view that contemporary social technologies are continuously changing our practical reality, a reality where human experience and technical artifacts have become beyond intertwined, but for many interwoven, inseparable – if this were to be true then type of cognizance (legal and personal) do we need to develop? Implied in this call is the need for both a better awareness and jurisdiction of these emergent issues. Whilst this edition is not (and could not be) a unified survey of human activity and digital media; the final edition contains 17 multidisciplinary papers spanning Law, Curation, Pedagogy, Choreography, Art History, Political Science, Creative Practice and Critical Theory – the volume attempts to illustrate the complexity of the situation and if possible the kinship between pertinent disciplines.

Human relationships are rich and they're messy and they're demanding. And we clean them up with technology. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self, as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right. ¹

Sherry Turkle's current hypothesis is that technology has introduced mechanisms that bypass traditional concepts of both community and identity indeed that we are facing (and some of us are struggling with) an array of reconceptualizations. Zygmunt Bauman in his essay “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity” suggests that:

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety if behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty. ²

Our ‘post-social’ context where increased communication, travel and migration bought about by technological advances has only multiplied Bauman's conditions of uncertainty. Whilst there may be aesthetic tropes within social media, there is no universally accepted

authority within contemporary culture nor is there an easy mutual acceptance of what is ‘right and proper’ after all we could be engaging in different iterations of “backward presence” or “forward presence” ³ whilst interacting with human and non-human alike (see Simone O'Callaghan's contribution: “Seductive Technologies and Inadvertent Voyeurs” for a further exploration of presence and intimacy).

Editing such a broad set of responses required an editorial approach that both allowed full expansion of each paper's discourse whilst looking for interconnections (and oppositions) in attempt to distil some commonalties. This was achieved by mentally placing citation, speculation and proposition between one another. Spilling the ‘meaning’ of the individual contributions into proximate conceptual spaces inhabited by other papers and looking for issues that overlapped or resonated allowed me formulate a sense of what might become future pertinent themes, and what now follows below are the notes from this process.

What Social Contract?

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.
(Thomas Hobbes in chapter XIII of the *Leviathan*) ⁴

Deborah Swack's “FEELTRACE and the Emotions (after Charles Darwin),” Johnny Golding's “Ana-Materialism & The Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast” and Kriss Ravetto's “Anonymous Social As Political” argue that our perception of political authority is somewhere between shaky towards becoming erased altogether. Whilst the original 17th century rational for sublimating to a political authority – i.e. we'd default back to a war like state in the absence of a binding social contract – seems like a overwrought fear, the capacity for repugnant anti-social behavior as a consequence of no longer being in awe of any common power is real and increasingly impactful. ⁵ Problematically the notion of a government that has been created by individuals to protect themselves from one

another sadly seems hopelessly incongruent in today's increasingly skeptical context. Co-joined to the dissipation of perceptible political entities – the power dynamics of being ‘good’ rather than ‘bad’ and or ‘sinful’ appears to be one of most flimsy of our prior social borders. The new reality that allows us to transgress and explore our tastes and predictions from a remote and often depersonalized position feels safer (i.e. with less personal accountability) a scenario that is a further exacerbated space vacated by the historic role of the church as a civic authority. Mikhail Pushkin in his paper “Do we need morality anymore?” explores the online moral value system and how this ties into the deleterious effect of the sensationalism in traditional mass media. He suggests that the absence of restrictive online social structure means the very consciousness of sin and guilt has now changed and potentially so has our capability of experiencing the emotions tied to guilt. ⁶ Sandra Wilson and Lila Gomez in their paper “The Premediation of Identity Management in Art & Design – New Model Cyborgs – Organic & Digital” concur stating that “the line dividing taboos from desires is often blurred, and a taboo can quickly flip into a desire, if the conditions under which that interaction take place change.”

The Free?

The issue of freedom seems to be where much of the debate continues – between what constitutes false liberty and real freedoms. Unique in their own approach Golding's and Pushkin's papers challenge the premise that is implied in this edition's title – that ‘Freedom and Taboo’ even have a place at all in our contemporary existence as our established codes of morality (and ethics) have been radically reconfigured. This stance made me recall Hobbes's first treaty where he argued that “commodious living” (i.e. morality, politics, society), are purely conventional and that moral terms are not objective states of affairs but are reflections of tastes and preferences – indeed within another of his key concepts (i.e. the “State of Nature”) ‘anything goes’ as nothing is immoral and or unjust. ⁷ It would ‘appear’ that we are freer from traditional institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e.

procedures, networks, our relationship to objects and things) seem to have dissipated alongside our capacity to perceive them. The problematic lack of an established conventional commodious living such as Bauman's idea that something is 'right and proper' is under challenge by the individualized complexity thrown up from our disinhibited minds, which can result in benign or toxic or 'other' behaviors depending on our personality's variables.⁷ Ravetto describes how Anonymous consciously inhabits such an 'other' space:

Anonymous demonstrates how the common cannot take on an ethical or coherent political message. It can only produce a heterogeneity of spontaneous actions, contradictory messages, and embrace its contradictions, its act of vigilante justice as much as its dark, racist, sexist, homophobic and predatory qualities.

Perception

Traditionally good cognition of identity/society/relationships (networks and procedures) was achieved through a mix of social conditioning and astute mindfulness. On the other hand at present the dissipation of contiguous social forms has problematized the whole process creating multiple social situations (new and prior) and rather than a semi-stable situation (to reflect upon) we are faced with a digital deluge of unverifiable information. Perception and memory comes up in David R. Burns's paper "Media, Memory, and Representation in the Digital Age: Rebirth" where he looks at the problematic role of digital mediation in his personal experience of the 9/11. He recalls the discombobulating feeling of being: "part of the digital media being internationally broadcast across the world." Burns seeks to highlight the media's influence over an individual's constructed memories. From a different perspective Charlie Gere reminds us of the prominence (and shortcomings) of our ocular-centric perspective in his discussion of "Alterity, Pornography,

and the Divine" and cites Martin Jay's essay "Scopic Regimes of Modernity"⁸ which in turn explores a variety of significant core concepts of modernity where vision and knowledge meet and influence one another. Gere/Jay's line of references resurrect for the reader Michel Foucault's notion of the "Panopticon" (where surveillance is diffused as a principle of social organization),⁹ Guy DeDord's *The Society of the Spectacle* i.e. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation"¹⁰ and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (published in 1979).¹¹ The latter gave form to an enduringly relevant question: are we overly reliant on a representational theory of perception? And how does this intersect with the risks associated with solipsistic introjection within non face-to-face online interactions? The ethics of 'looking' and data collection is also a feature of Deborah Burns's paper "Differential Surveillance of Students: Surveillance/Sousveillance Art as Opportunities for Reform" in which Burns asks questions of the higher education system and its complicity in the further erosion of student privacy. Burn's interest in accountability bridges us back to Foucault's idea of panoptic diffusion:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection¹²

In panoptic diffusion the knowingness of the subject is key – as we move towards naturalization of surveillance and data capture through mass digitization such power relationships change. This is a concern mirrored by Eric Schmidt Google's Executive Chairman when considering the reach of our digital footprints: "I don't believe society understands what happens when everything is available, knowable and recorded

by everyone all the time."¹³ Smita Kheria's "Copyright and Digital Art practice: The 'Schizophrenic' Position of the Digital Artist" and Alana Kushnir's "When Curating Meets Piracy: Rehashing the History of Unauthorised Exhibition-Making" explore accountability and power relationships in different loci whilst looking at the mitigation of creative appropriation and reuse. It is clear that in this area serious reconfigurations have occurred and that new paradigms of acceptability (often counter to the legal reality) are at play.

Bauman's belief that "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs"¹⁴ maybe a clue into why social media have become such an integral part of modern society. It is after all an activity that privileges 'looking' and objectifying without the recipient's direct engagement – a new power relationship quite displaced from traditional (identity affirming) social interactions. In this context of social media over dependency it may be timely to reconsider Guy-Ernest Debord's 'thesis 30':

The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.¹⁵

Underneath these issues of perception / presence / identity / is a change or at least a blurring in our political (and personal) agency. Don Ritter's paper "Content Osmosis and the Political Economy of Social Media" functions as a reminder of the historical precedents and continued subterfuges that occur in mediated feelings of empowerment. Whilst Brigit Bachler in her paper "Like Reality" presents to the reader that "besides reality television formats, social networking sites such as Facebook have successfully delivered a new form of watching each other, in a seemingly safe

setting, on a screen at home" and that "the appeal of the real becomes the promise of access to the reality of manipulation."¹⁶ The notion of better access to the 'untruth' of things also appears in Ravetto's paper "Anonymous: Social as Political" where she argues that "secrecy and openness are in fact aporias." What is unclear is that, as society maintains its voyeuristic bent and the spectacle is being conflated into the banality of social media, are we becoming occluded from meaningful developmental human interactions? If so, we are to re-create a sense of agency in a process challenged (or already transformed) by clever implicit back-end data gathering¹⁷ and an unknown/undeclared use our data's mined 'self.' Then, and only then, dissociative anonymity may become one strategy that allows us to be more independent; to be willed enough to see the world from our own distinctive needs whilst devising our own extensions to the long genealogy of moral concepts.

Somewhere / Someplace

Perpetual evolution and sustained emergence is one of the other interconnecting threads found within the edition. Many of the authors recognize a requirement for fluidity as a reaction to the pace of change. Geographer David Harvey uses the term "space-time compression" to refer to "processes that . . . revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time."¹⁸ Indeed there seems to be consensus in the edition that we are 'in' an accelerated existence and a concomitant dissolution of traditional spatial co-ordinates – Swack cites Joanna Zylinska's 'human being' to a perpetual "human becoming"¹⁹ whilst Golding in her paper reminds us that Hobbes also asserted that "[f]or seeing life is but a motion of Limbs"²⁰ and that motion, comes from motion and is inextricably linked to the development and right of the individual. But Golding expands this changing of state further and argues where repetition (and loop) exist so does a different experience:

The usual culprits of time and space (or time as distinct from space and vice versa), along with identity, meaning, Existenz, Being, reconfigure via a relational morphogenesis of velocity, mass, and intensity. This is an immanent surface cohesion, the compelling into a 'this' or a 'here' or a 'now,' a space-time terrain, a collapse and rearticulation of the tick-tick-ticking of distance, movement, speed, born through the repetitive but relative enfolding of otherness, symmetry and diversion.

Golding's is a bewildering proposition requiring a frame of mind traditionally fostered by theoretical physicists but one that may aptly summarize the nature of the quandary. The authors contributing to this edition all exist in their own ways in a post-digital environment, anthropologist Lucy Suchman describes this environment as being "the view from nowhere, detached intimacy, and located accountability."²¹ Wilson and Gomez further offer a possible coping strategy by exploring the usefulness of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's "pre-mediation" as a means to externalize a host of fears and reduce negative emotions in the face of uncertainty. The imperative to create some strategies to make sense of some of these pressing issues is something that I explore in my own contribution in which I offer the new term *Precarious Design* – as a category of contemporary practice that is emerging from the design community. Precarious Design encompasses a set of practices that by expressing current and near future scenarios are well positioned to probe deeper and tease out important underlying societal assumptions to attain understanding or control in our context of sustained cultural and technological change.

Embodiment

In theory our deterritorialized and changed relationship with our materiality provides a new context in which a disinhibited mind could better act on desires

and explore the taboo. Ken Hollings's paper "THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS, SALLY... Faults, lapses and imperfections in the sex life of machines" – presents a compelling survey of the early origin of when humans began to objectify and try live through our machines starting with disembodiment of voice as self that arose from the recording of sound via the Edison phonograph in 1876. Golding and Swack mull over the implications of the digital on embodiment and what it means now to be 'human' as we veer away from biological truth and associated moral values towards something else. Sue Hawksley's "Dancing on the Head of a Sin: touch, dance and taboo" reminds us of our sensorial basis in which:

Touch is generally the least shared, or acknowledged, and the most taboo of the senses. Haptic and touch-screen technologies are becoming ubiquitous, but although this makes touch more commonly experienced or shared, it is often reframed through the virtual, while inter-personal touch still tends to remain sexualized, militarized or medicalized (in most Western cultures at least).

Within her paper Hawksley provides an argument (and example) on how the mediation of one taboo – dance – through another – touch – could mitigate the perceived moral dangers and usual frames of social responsibility. Swack raises bioethical questions about the future nature of life for humans and "the embodiment and containment of the self and its symbiotic integration and enhancement with technology and machines." Whilst Wilson and Gomez's go on to discuss *Biopresence* by Shiho Fukuhara and Georg Tremmel – a project that provocatively "creates Human DNA trees by transcoding the essence of a human being within the DNA of a tree in order to create 'Living Memorials' or 'Transgenic Tombstones'"²² – as an example of a manifest situation that still yields a (rare) feeling of transgression into the taboo.

CONCLUSION

In the interstices of this edition there are some questions/observations that remain somewhat unanswered and others that are nascent in their formation. They are listed below as a last comment and as a gateway to further considerations.

Does freedom from traditional hierarchy equate to empowerment when structures and social boundaries are also massively variable and dispersed and are pervasive to the point of incomprehension/invalidation? Or is there some salve to be found in Foucault's line that "'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure,"²³ thus nothing is actually being 'lost' in our current context? And is it possible that power has always resided within the individual and we only need to readjust to this autonomy?

Conventional political power (and their panoptic strategies) seem to be stalling, as efforts to resist and subvert deep-seated and long-held governmental secrecy over military/intelligence activities have gained increased momentum while their once privileged data joins in the leaky soft membrane that is the ethics of sharing digitally stored information.

Through dissociative strategies like online anonymity comes power re-balance, potentially giving the individual better recourse to contest unjust actions/laws but what happens when we have no meaningful social contract to direct our civility? It seems pertinent to explore if we may be in need of a new social contract that reconnects or reconfigures the idea of accountability – indeed it was interesting to see the contrast between Suchman's observed 'lack of accountability' and the Anonymous collective agenda of holding (often political or corporate) hypocrites 'accountable' through punitive measures such as Denial-of-Service attacks.

Regarding de-contextualization of the image / identity – there seems to be something worth bracing oneself against in the free-fall of taxonomies, how we see, how we relate, how we perceive, how we understand that even the surface of things has changed and could still be changing. There is no longer a floating signifier but potentially an abandoned sign in a cloud of dissipating (or endlessly shifting) signification. Where once:

*The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.*²⁴

There now is no culturally specific normal in the diffuse digital-physical continuum, which makes the materiality and durability of truth very tenuous indeed; a scenario that judges-teaches-social workers are having some difficulty in addressing and responding to in a timely manner, an activity that the theoretically speculative and methodologically informed research as contained within this edition can hopefully help them with.

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PORNOGRAPHY, ALTERITY, DIVINITY

by

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THE OBSCENITY OF REPRESENTATION

Since the 1950s there has been a massive proliferation and increasing legitimization of pornographic imagery, not least because of the Internet. This extends beyond the boundaries of what might be recognizable as pornography, and has entered into the mainstream of culture. In the 1980s Susanne Kappeler described and wrote about what she called “the pornography of representation,” the idea that images that offend are not limited to some special domain called pornography, but rather that our everyday culture is saturated with pornographic imagery. One only has to look at any magazine stand, in which fetishized and sexualized images of the body, the female body in particular, are not limited to so-called ‘men’s magazines,’ but are to be found throughout the range of interests and subjects (including magazines intended for female consumption).

Without losing the specific critique of contemporary capitalist culture in Kappeler’s thesis, I would like to look at this in a slightly different way than is normal. Perhaps it is useful to think of the offense given by these images as something more like ‘blasphemy,’ in the sense of profane talk of something supposed to

ABSTRACT

In this paper I propose that when we look at an image, it looks back at us from a position of radical alterity. Thus the experience of looking at an image, any image, is always an experience of being confronted by the utterly other, one name for which might be ‘God.’ This is exemplified in God’s refusal to show his face to Moses in Exodus, and is clearly the underlying impetus behind the anxiety about images in the context of religion in many cultures. This is perhaps the reason the image, any image, is always also somehow obscene, in the very act of showing what is other. It shows us what should not be shown, what should be ‘obscaena,’ offstage. In the modern era however the female nude becomes a privileged site of this forbidden representation. Taking my cue from the work of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, as well as Gustave Courbet’s painting ‘L’Origine du Monde,’ Georges Bataille’s Madame Edwarda, in the book of the same name, who shows her genitals to the narrator while shouting ‘I am GOD,’ and Marcel Duchamp’s final work ‘Étant donné: 1° la chute d’eau / 2° le gazd’éclairage,’ I argue that pornographic representations of the female body are the explicit demonstration of the implicit condition of the image, in which the obscene and the divine are closely related as things that should not and indeed cannot be looked at. All this must be understood in the context of the increasing ubiquity, availability and normalization of pornography as a result, partly, of the World Wide Web. The ubiquity of pornography, and the more general acceptance of sexualized imagery in mainstream media has led to the lessening of pornography’s stigma, its transgressiveness, which is also, perhaps, a loss of a certain relation to the divine.

be sacred. I use this term deliberately to suggest that the issue involved in the offensiveness is, in subtle ways, bound up with the traces of religion. There is a sense in which all images are obscene. In the very act of showing they reveal something that ought otherwise to be concealed, that should happen ‘obscaena,’ offstage, out of sight of the audience. This is perhaps because they show that what is represented is always absolutely other. Or, to put it another way, the image exposes the otherness of what it shows. In particular it exposes the gap between the viewer and what he

or she views, a gap ultimately that is always that of what Derrida describes as a radical alterity or otherness – that being anything that is available to me as a representation is entirely separate from me (including my own image). If this is so then the image of human nakedness, of what should be concealed in shame, becomes the paradigm of the image more generally.

As Derrida points out in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, in a sense only a human can be naked, because the human is the only animal which chooses to clothe

itself. Animals are not naked, do not exist in nakedness, do not feel themselves to be naked, whereas humans are. Clothes and therefore nakedness are both proper to man, and as such derived from technicity, along with shame, evil, history and work.² Thus the image of the naked human always involves a shameful exposure to the gaze of the other. This encompasses a spectrum from the high art nude to the pornographic photograph or film and, more recently, the on-line proliferation of images and mp3s, and makes the supposed distinctions between different forms of nude image problematic, even if paintings of the nude are often romanticized, and stylized, in contrast to much photographic imagery.

But the ultimate example of what cannot, must not be seen is God, who is also the ultimate instance of radical alterity. The Bible often proclaims that it is not possible to see God and live. In *Exodus* Moses asks to see the glory of God, and is refused, and shown God's back instead. It is also in *Exodus*, among other places, that lists the Commandments given to Moses by God, the fourth of which states that "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

This of course constitutes an important part of a longer history of interdiction of the image, which includes also Byzantine and later Reformation iconoclasm, as well as Islamic forbidding of figural representation, and even modernist negation of the representational in the visual arts. That the fourth Commandment forbids all forms of representation suggests that the radical alterity of which God is the ultimate example, applies to all things in creation, a prefiguring of Derrida's famous declaration that "tout autre est tout autre," "every other is completely other."³

But there is also, arguably a sense in which the notion of the female body as obscene is a specific phenomenon. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Jacques Lacan looked at the late medieval phenomenon of courtly love, a theme he returned to in *Seminar XX: Encore*.⁴ In the latter he suggests that 'God' persists in the formed of the sexed Other.⁵ This is enabled in particular by the 'jouissance' of woman. Courtly love thus elevates woman to the absolute real Other, inaccessible and also devoid of specificity, and empty of all signification. This can be glimpsed in the long history of images of idealized femininity, from Dante's Beatrice, to Goethe's 'eternal feminine' and onto Breton's fugitive objects of mad love. It is in the context of courtly love, as Denis de Rougemont pointed out in *Love in the Western World*, that the phenomenon of romantic love emerged. This kind of love emphasizes the transporting effects of erotic desire, over the more mundane demands of marital life, to the detriment of the latter.⁶

For Lacan Woman is one of the 'names-of-the-father.' In Seminar XXIII Lacan declares simply that "[T]he absolute necessity for the human species being that there should be Another of the Other. This is the one generally called God, but which analysis unveils as being quite simply The woman." It is in this context that Lacan also declared that "Woman is a symptom of man."⁷

It is perhaps as a result of the occupation by 'Woman' of the place of God, as the latter absconds or disappears from view, that the artistic genre of the female nude emerges in the Renaissance. The female nude is the subject, not merely of erotic desire, but that desire as aimed at the radical alterity of the other, one of whose names is God. The naked woman, especially when reclining, becomes the maddening enigma whose alterity the male artist seeks to breach in a hopeless quest for wholeness. That wholeness itself

is represented by the absence of the hole by which it might be breeched, or in other words the vagina. It is only through his ability to fill this hole that the man is given the illusion that the alterity of the other can be overcome, an illusion doomed to be followed by the traumatic realization of the impossibility of the sexual relation. That impossibility itself reveals that there is no hope of wholeness of healing in our relations with the other, whether the other sex, or God as the other, but only an experience of trauma.

This is the trauma of the possibility of castration. Freud famously remarks that "[P]robably no male human is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals."⁸ For Freud this threat of castration is disavowed through the process of fetishism, in which something stands in for the absence of the penis in the female human. The image of the female nude, in its apparent wholeness, and in the disavowal of the female genitals as a lack arising out of castration, is itself a kind of Freudian fetish, as perhaps is the particular fascination with female beauty

THE MODERN GAZE

It was at around the same time as the emergence of the nude as one of the main subjects of Western art that pornography also began. As Lynn Hunt and others have pointed out pornography, as opposed to eroticism, is an invention of modernity, which begins to emerge in the 16th century, before being named and defined in the 19th.⁹ Its emergence thus coincides with the paradigmatically modern gaze, the scopic regime of modernity, named by Martin Jay as "albertian-cartesianperspectivalism."¹⁰ This is a form of looking which involves vision projecting out from the autonomous subject to a world from which it is separate. It seeks to penetrate what it looks at. Thus it is phallic,

and as such also vulnerable to castration, as what it looked at holds the male viewer at least in its Medusan gaze, the gaze that denies him recognition of his possession of the phallus. Pornography thus emerges as the other of the modern phallic fetish nude of high art, which itself is intended to disavow the castrating gaze of the other.

This then may be the important difference between art and pornography in terms of the nude. The former offers the promise of wholeness by concealing the site of trauma, while the latter reveals the site of trauma more overtly. Though images we might now deem as both erotic and obscene have probably existed in most, if not all cultures, the idea of 'pornography' is itself a purely modern, western concept. Furthermore it exists only in relation to, and distinction from the fine art nude, as its other. Pornography, as obscene, would not have emerged without the kind of nude representation in which the genitals were disavowed, and those representations in turn themselves emerged in relation to the divinization of the female body as radically other. In a sense pornography offers the revelation of the truth of the image as obscene, and thus also concerned with the radically other, one word for which might be God. The revelation is also that the relation with the radically other, God, woman, or whatever, is always traumatic, and involves the undoing of the integrity of the self.

THE ENIGMA OF WOMAN

The distinction between art and pornography turns possibly on pubic hair, which in turn is metonymic of the female genitals. The history of the portrayal of pubic hair in art, and especially western art, is an interesting topic in itself. Though there are earlier examples of the representation of pubic hair in western art, especially in print making, the first major work of art



Figure 1. *La Maja Desnuda (The Naked Maja)*, 1795 – 1800, by Francisco Goya. Oil on canvas. Photo by the On-line gallery.MuseoNacional del Prado. Used with permission via the Creative CommonsAttribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

to explicitly make such a representation was possibly Goya's *The Naked Maja*. This was regarded by many at the time as pornographic, as later would be a painting it greatly influenced, Manet's *Olympia*, which though it does not feature pubic hair, was scandalous in being a portrait of a courtesan rather than an idealized female figure of myth.

The scandalousness of *The Naked Maja* does bring into doubt one of the presumptions of studies of pornographic images; that the image of the nude woman only became scandalous with the invention of the photography. Painted at the end of the eighteenth century Goya's picture predates the invention of photography by several decades. On the other hand photography does greatly facilitate both the production and distribution of images, thus depriving them of the legitimation by artistic skill, and by being situated in museums and other respectable institutions, at least until comparatively recently, with the wider recognition of photography as an art form in its own right. Above all photography allows images to circulate freely and out of control of the authorities

Thus the emergence of the scandalousness of the female nude is largely in the context of a culture in which photography has been developed. The painting

that, in a sense, manifests this most obviously, is of course Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*. This notorious painting shows nothing less than what would now be called a 'beaver shot,' or in other words an explicit and detailed rendition of female genitalia, complete with copious pubic hair. To add to the image's transgressive and pornographic air, the model is covered by a sheet above the breasts. It is believed that the model for the image may have been Joanna Heffernan, who was painted by Courbet a number of times. She was Whistler's mistress at the time, and the subject of *Symphony in White no. 1: The White Girl*, a far more idealized portrayal of femininity. Courbet and Whistler are both artists who eschewed the narrative and this moralizing functions of art, and instead practiced forms of realism that aimed to paint the world as it is, which is manifested in *L'Origine du Monde*. The title of the painting, while alluding to the role of female genitalia in procreation and birth, also seems to hint at a theological element: God is the origin of the world, the prime mover. If, as I suggested God is the ultimate example of what must not be looked at, what is obscene, then the female genitals are in some way an image of God (not least also because they are regarded often as a lack or an absence).

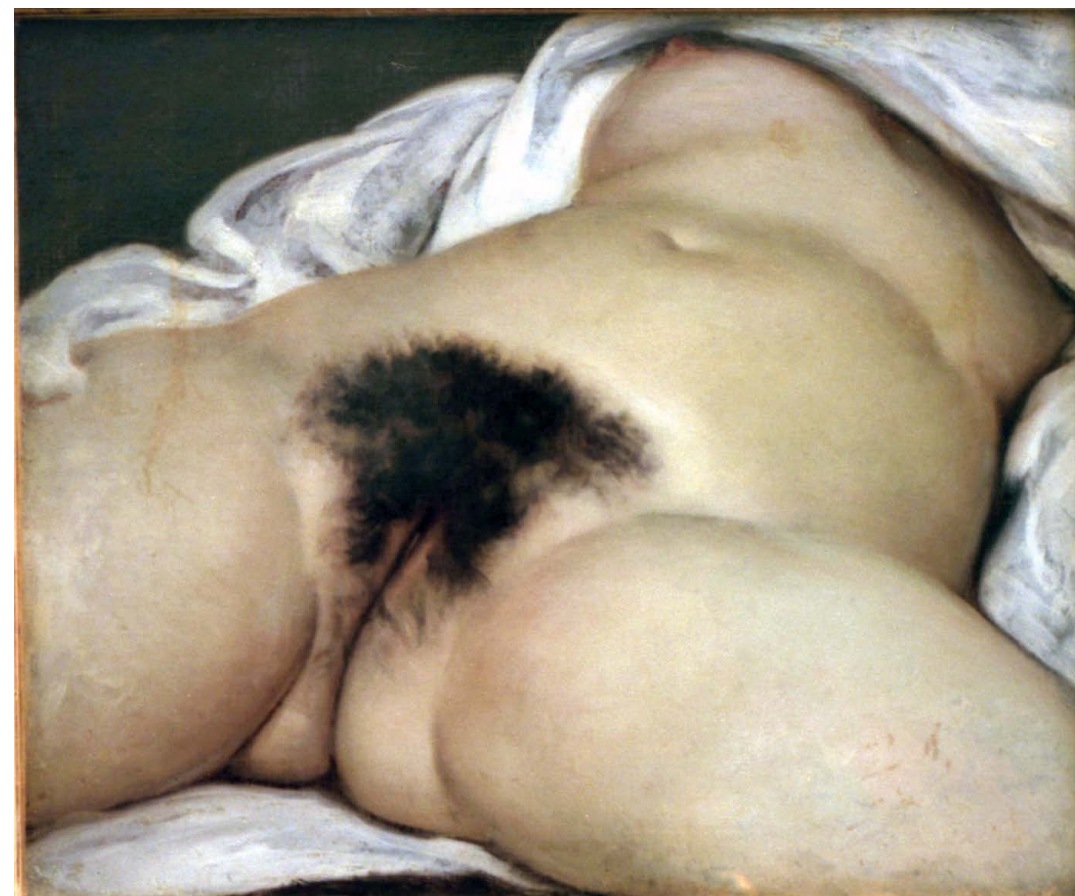


Figure 2. *L'Origine du Monde (Origin of the World)*, 1866, by Gustave Courbet. Oil on canvas. Photo by Unknown. Used with permission via the Creative CommonsAttribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Originally commissioned by an Ottoman diplomat named Khalil Bey, it was eventually bought by none other than Jacques Lacan, who was then married to Georges Bataille's ex-wife Sylvia. Lacan commissioned his friend Andre Masson to decorate a sliding door with a stylized drawing of the painting, in order to conceal it if necessary. The painting remains obscene enough to cause problems when used as book covers as recently as the last decade. The obvious, and indeed family connection here is with Georges Bataille's story *Madame Edwarda*. This extraordinary story, written under the pseudonym Pierre Angelique ('angelic peter,' or 'angelic stone,' with a clear reference to St Thomas Aquinas, the angelic doctor), involves the narrator's description of a delirious trip through Paris, stopping at a brothel where he encounters the eponymous Edwarda. After ejaculating—"bursting, like a pane of glass shattering"¹¹—he suddenly freezes.

*It was as though I were borne aloft in a flight of headless and unbodied angels shaped from the broad swooping of wings, but it was simpler than that. I became unhappy and felt painfully forsaken, as one is when in the presence of GOD.*¹²

Later Edwarda disappears and then reappears and speaks to the narrator.

Madame Edwarda's thin voice, like her slender body, was obscene: 'I guess what you want is to see the old rag and ruin,' she said. Hanging on to the tabletop with both hands, I twisted around toward her. She was seated, she held one leg stuck up in the air, to open her crack yet wider she used fingers to draw the folds of skin apart. And so Madame Edwarda's 'old rag and ruin' loured at me, hairy and pink, just as full of life as some loathsome squid. 'Why,' I stammered in a subdued tone,

'why are you doing that?' 'You can see for yourself,' she said, 'I'm GOD.' 'I'm going crazy –' 'Oh, no you don't, you've got to see, look. . .' Her harsh, scraping voice mellowed, she became almost childlike in order to say, with a lassitude, with the infinite smile of abandon: 'Oh, listen, fellow! The fun I've had . . .'¹³

They leave the brothel and go into the streets of Paris.

At that hour of the night the street was deserted. Suddenly gone wild, mute, Edwarda raced on alone. The Porte Saint-Denis loomed before her, she stopped. I stopped too, she waited for me underneath the arch – unmoving, exactly under the arch. She was entirely black, simply there, as distressing as an emptiness, a hole. I realized she wasn't frolicking, wasn't joking, and indeed that, beneath the garment enfolding her, she was mindless: rapt, absent. Then all the drunken exhilaration drained out of me, then I knew that She had not lied, that She was GOD. Her presence had about it the unintelligible out-and-out simplicity of a stone right in the middle of the city I had the feeling of being in the mountains at night time, lost in a lifeless, hollow solitude.¹⁴

Maurice Blanchot invokes Madame Edwarda in his short essay 'The Community of Lovers.' Taking his cue from Marguerite Duras' short recit 'The Malady of Death' he connects love with death and writes

*of that malady of death which at times would designate love prevented and at other times the pure movement of loving, of calling to the abyss, to the black night discovered by the vertiginous emptiness 'of the spread legs' (how not to think here of Madame Edwarda).*¹⁵

The story by Duras describes an encounter between a man and a beautiful woman he hires in order to understand the enigma of love. For Blanchot the woman

represents the enigmatic Other that the man cannot ever fully grasp.

*[A]lways in action in front of this body he looks upon in unhappiness, because he cannot see all of it, its impossible totality, all its aspects; though she be a closed form. Only in as much as she escapes the summons, she escapes what would turn her into a graspable whole, a sum that would integrate the infinite and thus reduce it to an integrable finite.*¹⁶

Blanchot, Bataille and Duras may help us understand Marcel Duchamp's last work, *Étantdonnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gazd'éclairage*, which he worked on in secret for the last couple of decades of his life. It was only shown posthumously, and is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.¹⁷ The work consists of a wooden door, in which there are two small peepholes. Looking through the holes one sees a tableau of a young woman's body in a kind of undergrowth. She appears to be holding a gas lamp in her upraised left hand. Her head is not visible and her hairless genitals are directly facing the viewer. Among other things this is Duchamp's ironic homage to Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*.

Étantdonnés capable of endless interpretation, the enabling of which was of course one of Duchamp's artistic strategies. At a fairly straightforward level the work's 'mise-en-scène' suggests an engagement with the obscenity of the nude representation. Behind the heavy wooden door it is literally obscene, 'off-scene.' And of course the obligation to peer into the peepholes casts the viewer into the role of explicit voyeur. Perhaps Duchamp is casting the female body as a kind of ready-made. In this context it is worth remembering that Duchamp described his work, ironically perhaps, as "transubstantiation,"¹⁸ the process in which the ordinary materials of bread and wine are transformed

into the body of God. The period in which he worked on *Étantdonnés* secret is also the time in which pornography became sanitized and legitimized for public consumption, through publications such as *Playboy*. Founded in 1953, *Playboy* was one of the harbingers of the so-called sexual revolution, which would be a key component of the upheavals of the 1960s. Against expectations Bataille condemned this liberation or liberalization, remarking that:

*[I]n my view, sexual disorder is accursed. In this respect and in spite of appearances, I am opposed to the tendency which seems today to be sweeping it away. I am not among those who see the neglect of sexual interdictions as a solution. I even think that human potential depends on these interdictions: we could not imagine this potential without these interdictions.*¹⁹

The enigma of woman continues to perturb artists, both male and female, from Richard Hamilton's late nudes, to Jenny Saville's fleshy paintings, and onto Damien Hirst's ludicrous sculpture *Verity*. The latter, which is an eleven foot high representation of a pregnant woman, whose womb has been partially exposed, and who holds a sword aloft, does rather simply-mindedly engage with the trope of woman as truth. George Bataille famously compared the unveiling of truth to a young girl undressing.²⁰ This is also the trope examined in Derrida's famous engagement with Nietzsche. In the late 1880s Nietzsche published *Beyond Good and Evil*, which starts with the question "[S]upposing truth is a woman – what then?" This question becomes the starting point for Derrida's examination of Nietzsche's style in *Eperons/Spurs*, as well as his conflation of 'Woman' with 'Truth.'²¹

In 'Le Facteur de la Vérité' Derrida analyses the process of psychoanalytic reading as an unveiling, 'aletheia,' to use the term taken from the Greek by

Heidegger to indicate truth as 'un-concealing.' Writing about Lacan's seminar on Poe's 'The Purloined Letter,' he suggests that Lacan's supposed restitution of the truth of the story is governed by the "notion of veiling/unveiling" that "attunes the entire Seminar to the Heideggerian discourse on the truth."²² Writing about the place of the eponymous letter in the story he continues that:

*This proper place.. is the place of castration: woman as the unveiled site of a lack of a penis, as the truth of the phallus, that is, of castration.. Veiling/unveiling here concerns a hole, a non-being; the Truth of Being as non-being. The truth is 'woman' as veiled/unveiled castration. This is where the signifier (its inadequation with the signified) gets underway, this is the site of the signifier. But this is also where the trial begins, the promise of reappropriation, of return: 'the search for and restitution of the object'.. The singular unity of the letter is the site of the contract of the truth with itself. This is why the letter comes back to, amounts to [revient] woman.. this is why, as Lacan says elsewhere, the letter amounts to, comes back to Being.. that is to the nothing that would be opening itself as the hole between woman's legs.*²³

But that castration is the site of truth does not mean "truth as essential dislocation and irreducible fragmentation."²⁴ Castration-truth contracts itself to bring the "phallus, the signifier, the letter, or the fetish back into their *oikos*, their familiar dwelling, their proper place."²⁵ In this it is the opposite to, or an antidote for fragmentation, inasmuch as what is missing has a fixed place, free from all substitution. "Something is missing from its place, but the lack is never missing from it."²⁶ This is why for Lacan, according to Derrida, there is a link between Femininity and Truth, and why Lacan capitalizes the word Woman, a practice he normally reserves for Truth.

Castration-truth is contrasted with 'dissemination,' Derrida's term for the "always already divided generation of meaning,"²⁷ which makes it impossible to return to a unity of meaning, and which "spills in advance."²⁸ As Derrida puts it in an interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta, republished in *Positions*.

*Dissemination 'is' this angle of the play of castration which does not signify, which permits itself to be constituted neither as a signified, nor a signifier, no more presents that represents itself, no more shows than hides itself. Therefore in and of itself it is neither truth (adequation or unveiling) nor veil. It is what I have called the graphic of the hymen, which can no longer be measured by the opposition veil/nonveil.*²⁹

CONCLUSION

In *Rogues* Derrida suggests that:

*For wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable nonsovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, capable of contradicting itself or of repenting (a thought that is neither impossible nor without example), it would be a completely different story, perhaps even the story of a God who deconstructs himself in his ipseity.*³⁰

Perhaps what is needed is a deconstruction of Woman as the privileged site of lack and as maddening enigma, as a substitute for God. Against that structuring which insists on privileging the binary opposition between man and woman, one might imagine a differential structure composed of singularities, each of which is other to the other. Perhaps the work of feminist artists such as Nan Goldin or Cindy Sherman

hint at his in different ways. Derrida tries to imagine such a possibility in his interview with feminist theorist Christie McDonald in the journal *Diacritics* in which he imagines 'a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bi-sexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing.'³¹ Perhaps Derrida's suggestion offers us an idea of what sexuality itself could become, especially in relation to what might be possible on-line. In amongst the more conventional and more conventionally transgressive representations of sexuality it is possible that other more complex ways of being can be found, that confound the normative binaries of gendered sexuality. This returns us to Kappeler's analysis of the pornography of representation. What might such a vision of a postbinary sexuality mean for pornography? For the future of pornography? And for its relation to sexual violence and domination? Perhaps, in keeping with Derrida's antiocularcentrism, and suspicion of the role of light and vision in metaphysics, from Plato, through the Enlightenment, and onto Phenomenology, we need to practice a kind of iconoclasm, a deliberate refusal of, or blindness in front of the image. It is of course impossible to escape the image and representation, as the history of iconoclasm shows. Failing this we need perhaps to complicate our response and relation to the image by refusing its referential claims, as Derrida does in *Right of Inspection*. In this polylogue, a commentary on a series of photographs, some erotic and maybe even pornographic, by Marie-Francoise Plissart, Derrida deliberately refuses any overarching interpretation. The point here is not to reveal the truth underneath the image, even if that truth is one of exploitation and abuse, but rather to refuse the image the right to truth.³² ■

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