**GALLAGHER — Black Boxed**

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**Black-Boxed Selves**

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We are witnessing a rise in the politicization of absence- and presence-oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance, new struggles around prevention, the therapeutics of the body, piracy and contagion, informatic capture and . . . data mining.

—Alexander R. Galloway, Black Box, Black Bloc

Taking Galloway’s essay as its point of departure, this panel draws together three papers that work to unpack the idea of ‘the black-boxed self’, addressing some of the ways in which selfhood is understood, articulated, and monetized in an age when networked digital devices are transforming politics, medicine, play, and creative endeavour—not to mention academic research.

Indeed, we propose that much of the most interesting work proceeding in the humanities today can be understood in terms of the attempt to engage, imagine, or theorize black-boxed selves of one kind or another. We might think, here, of the intentionally opaque or illegible selves addressed in Nicolas de Villiers’ elaboration (2012) of the strategies of ‘opacity’ deployed by those seeking to queer normative models of subjectivity and biography, or of anthropologist Gabriella Coleman’s work (2014) on the amorphous hacker collective Anonymous and their bids to evade online surveillance and censorship; of attempts to render one’s own body less cryptic, whether through the kinds of life-writing analysed by those working in the medical humanities or nascent practices of digital self-quantification and ‘personal informatics’ (see Whitehead, 2013; Schull, 2014); or of research into the ‘data images’ of users captured by technologies like Microsoft’s Xbox 360, a blockbusting videogame console that pioneered modes of covert user surveillance (Cybulski, 2014).

Like these projects, our papers adopt a multidisciplinary approach, variously taking their cues from literary theory, phenomenology, the medical humanities, media archaeology, platform studies, and affect theory, and drawing too on the new tools and tactics available to scholars working on and with digital media. Between us we address a range of media and practices, from videogaming and Twitter fiction to YouTube roleplay and digital sousveillance. By addressing developments in these specific fields, our panel aims to broach broader questions regarding the ways in which emergent forms of digital black boxing are shaping identity work and self-expression today.

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**Paper 1**

**ASMR Culture and the Reading of the Black-Boxed Self**

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Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is a term used by online communities of people who claim to experience states of euphoric, even orgasmic, cranial ‘tingling’ when exposed to certain sensory stimuli. These communities have coalesced via online platforms where participants describe their ASMR experiences and swap media that ‘trigger’ them, typically videos rich in ambient sounds; soft, deliberate speech; meticulous activity, and/or stylized gestures. These sites and practices have in turn spawned a class of ‘ASMRtists’ who produce videos catering to those with the condition, their content ranging from whispered recitations of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* to role-plays that see them posing as dentists, witches, or librarians.

Perhaps inevitably, the claims made for ASMR (from inducing ecstasy to ameliorating anxiety and insomnia to reversing hair loss) and the dubiously pseudo-scientific discourse that has evolved around it have occasioned scepticism. Here, however, I want to suspend the question of whether ASMR is ‘real’, reasoning that, whether we grant the condition medical legitimacy or not, ASMR *culture* offers a fascinating lens on the immemorial problem of opening up the ‘black box’ of the individual body to render somatic states and physiological phenomena shareable, and on the ways in which the networked black boxes inhabiting our desks, pockets, and living rooms now factor into this problem.

In short, I am willing to risk ‘black boxing’ ASMR—accepting that, whatever its medical status, the concept now functions as an ‘intermediary’ in a variety of broader conceptual, technological, cultural, and corporeal networks (Latour, 2005, 39)—in order to address what the phenomenon tell us about both the construction of the self and the nature of humanistic research in the era of data mining, search engines, and social media. Galloway argues that ours has become a ‘cybernetic societ[y]’ in which black-boxed systems are not just pervasive but paradigmatic, and that, as a consequence, any account of contemporary culture and politics must address the terms upon which ideas and entities are allowed to appear and disappear; in response, I consider the conditions of ASMR’s appearance, paying particular attention to the fact that the phenomenon is essentially coeval (as term, concept, and claimable identity, if not as experience) with the host of developments connoted by the term ‘Web 2.0’. With the move from a text-centric to a multimodal web, the proliferation of webcams and microphones, and the emergence of blogging platforms, social networks, and content aggregators has come the ability, if not the imperative, to connect, express, sharem and generally ‘Broadcast [One]self’. By demonstrating that the social web can also be a platform for *diagnosing* oneself, ASMR raises questions about the culture of the Web, and about how we ‘read’ cultural phenomena that seem to resist traditional scholarly approaches, exemplifying an era in which ‘unveil[ing] and decod[ing]’ may have run their course as critical strategies (Galloway, 2011, 243).

My paper responds by identifying three modes of reading that, although I elaborate them in relation to ASMR, might equally serve to illuminate other online cultures. The first involves reading contextually—meaning, in the case of ASMR, drawing on media archaeology and the cultural history of nosology. The former insists that ‘the history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus’ and that ‘instead of looking for obligatory trends, master media, or imperative vanishing points, one should be able to discover individual variations’ (Zielinski, 2006, 7); the latter, meanwhile, teaches us that conditions like green sickness, neurasthenia, and spermathorrea did not have to be real to have very real effects and authorising contexts (e.g., Rosenman, 2003), just as various conditions currently considered medically legitimate were once dismissed or relegated to the status of psychosomatic disorder (Fletcher, 2004). Both point to the importance of considering how online ASMR culture evokes (and sometimes invokes) other media and moments, not to erase differences but to bring specificities into keener focus.

The second mode of reading involves attending to the terms upon which media texts are instrumentalized. This means reading cultural artefacts in relation to the strategies by way of which they are integrated into and made to facilitate web users’ everyday activities. ASMR video archives tend to tag material as either ‘intentional’ (that is, created for the express purpose of eliciting ASMR) or ‘unintentional’ (material that happens to be conducive to the desired state); ASMRtists’ works can, in turn, elicit suspicion, hilarity, curiosity, and distaste when experienced out of context. If this raises issues of ‘context collapse’ (boyd and Marwick, 2011) indicative of the way media become unmoored from their original circumstances and purposes online, it also raises question of cultural value; from an ASMR perspective, QVC presenters’ demonstrations of kitchenware, fan-made videogame ‘Let’s Play’ videos, and readings of modernist poetry can prove equally valuable means of accomplishing the ‘affective labour’ of modulating moods and physiological states (Andrejevic, 2011, 89). In this respect, ASMR culture asks us to think about the fate and function of cultural artefacts on the Web. Primed by Galloway, we might characterize its approach to cultural artefacts as cybernetic rather than hermeneutic: media become ‘inputs’ judged in terms of their ability to elicit particular affective ‘outputs’ rather than texts to be decoded. Networked digital devices, meanwhile, become tools for modulating and maintaining moods and atmospheres, creating ‘bubbles’ of pleasure, comfort, and belonging within environments otherwise experienced as empty or oppressive. Swapping media, testimonies, theories, and tips, ASMR ‘sufferers’ prompt us to consider the emergence of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls ‘genres of the present’—discursive formats and cultural practices that enable their exponents to retain a sense of continuity and community in a sociocultural landscape increasingly characterised by anxiety, precarity, and flux.

Finally, I propose reading cultural projects in terms of the use they make of the Web’s affordances. From this perspective, we can see ASMR culture as the product of an Internet seeking to transcend text, and it was surely Web 2.0’s move to foster the creation and dissemination of audiovisual content that allowed the varieties of acoustic (rather than, say, haptic or olfactory) experience that ‘sufferers’ recount to come to prominence. At the same time, however, ASMR culture points to the continuing privilege afforded language on a web where even nonverbal content is found and filed by way of text (the gradual rise of image- and speech-based search technologies notwithstanding). Looking back at the blogs and forums across which a discourse of ASMR developed, we can see how the project of forging a common vocabulary was both enabled and constrained by the structures, features, and implicit logics of different online platforms. Blogs’ ‘tag clouds’, for example, now operate as records of participatory etiology at work, showing how certain terms and themes ballooned as consensus built behind them while others were doomed to remain outliers. We see, too, how the ASMR community continues to pursue both personal experiences and public recognition of the condition by making imaginative use of familiar tools. Thus, Reddit’s ‘upvote’ system, conventionally used as an all-purpose measure of appreciation or interest, is, on the r/asmr ‘subreddit’, recast as a means of gauging the efficacy of different media as triggers and so refining the definition of the condition. By introducing new usage conventions, the ASMR community has refunctioned the website’s interface as a tool of definition and quantification. Turning the same black box to innovative new ends, this strategy offers a microcosmic hint as to how other black-boxed systems might be made to yield new and strange cultural outputs.

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**Paper 2**

**Literature, E-Health, and the Black-Boxed Self**

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It is thus today no longer a question simply of the enemy’s black box, but the black boxing of the self, of any node contained in a network of interaction. The enemy’s machine is not simply a device in a German airplane, it is ourselves: a call center employee, a card reader at a security checkpoint, a piece of software, a genetic sequence, a hospital patient. The black box is no longer a cipher waiting to be unveiled and decoded, it is a function defined exclusively through its inputs and outputs.

—Galloway, 2011, 243

Alexander R. Galloway’s mention of a hospital patient falls at the end of a list, a seemingly casual example among many of the black boxing of the self in contemporary society. It is, however, the patient who forms the basis of this talk, the central figure in an argument that considers the import of Galloway’s notion for the medical humanities today. As e-health becomes a central and mushrooming area for health care, medical research, and patient experience, it is as well that the medical humanities reflect on their own involvement with the digital. Galloway’s description of the ‘black-boxed self’ seems to me a useful place to begin teasing out some of the issues around representations of pain, illness, and the body in an online setting. Explicitly interdisciplinary in its discussion of research in e-health, the medical humanities, life writing, literary studies, and the digital humanities, I use two case studies as a means of focusing my discussion.

The first, Jennifer Egan’s 2012 tweeted story ‘Black Box’, explores, against the explicit backdrop of government spying, the fusing of technologies of surveillance with the human body. In this piece of serialized digital literature, the female speaker’s body has become the black-box recorder in a theatre of war, complete with ‘universal data port’ and devices implanted in the ear and eye, under the hairline, and between the toes. Fusing body and technology, Egan’s story also emphasizes the ‘Disassociation Technique’, a process for dividing the self from bodily experience and pain. Black boxed though the body may be, Egan seems to suggest the possibility of a self outside of and distinct from the confines of that box.

Illuminating contemporary anxieties around surveillance, digital technologies, and the human body, Egan’s story posits a troubling relationship between aesthetics and the biodigital. Technical advances here become a nightmare perpetuation of female objectification, and even the form of the fiction, a series of tweets purportedly offering the narrator’s stream of consciousness, seems perilously close to the serialized outputs of a sousveillance device. While Egan’s story offers an important example of the ambivalence often characterising literary responses to digital advances and the black-boxed self, the denunciation of such technologies and associated conceptualisations is often much less straightforward within a medical setting.

Take the example that forms my second case study: epilepsy, and its online, social media, and app provision. The most common serious brain condition worldwide, epilepsy affects 50 million people, with around 80% of patients living in developing countries (WHO, 2012). A chronic condition identified by a tendency to experience seizures, people with epilepsy regularly experience the black boxing of themselves. The event that not only identifies their condition but also frequently stigmatises them in society is (in most forms of the condition) inaccessible to the individual.

In addition, while earlier medical approaches emphasized the diagnosis and location of seizure origin in the brain, this has been largely superseded by a black-boxed approach. Managing symptoms, with continued self-monitoring by patients, is now the focus of much epilepsy medicine. This turn has led, not only to research attention being focused on how patients with epilepsy access information, advice, and support via the Web (known to improve well-being) but also to the development of numerous apps designed to aid self-management (Hoch et al., 1999; Shegog et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2007; Wicks et al., 2012). These include those that track medications and symptoms, to those that monitor heart rate and breathing, alerting carers if unusual activity suggests that a seizure might be occurring.

On the one hand, then, the monitored subject becomes the quintessential black box, reduced to a series of inputs and outputs, with any sense of interiority rendered problematically disrupted or inaccessible. On the other hand, such technologically aided self-management can markedly improve the patients’ experience of their condition, reducing hospital admissions and some of the dangers associated with (clonic-tonic) seizures. Furthermore, this sousveillance offers the subject a form of technologized narrative that might capture those events lost to consciousness. Can, in fact, the black boxing of the self offer the subject a new and potentially useful form of life writing?

In reflecting on these issues, I turn to the medical humanities, itself part of a response to the behaviourist understanding of the self (that also models the black box) so dominant in medicine at mid-century. Over the last 30 years, scholars such as Arthur Frank (2013), Arthur Kleinman (1988), Rita Charon (2006), and Kathryn Montgomery (2006) have developed the field of so-called illness narratives. Attending to the ways in which individuals experience, understand, and represent their illnesses, this scholarship has had a significant impact not only on scholars interested in thinking about relations between literature and medicine but also with medicine itself and the generalized move towards patient-centred care. Attempting to respond to and resist the conceptualization of the patient as a series of symptoms or outputs, the behaviourist black box is (theoretically at least) repudiated in favour of narrative-sensitive medicine that is conscious of the individual experience (Vaccarella 2011).

Yet in the increasingly technologized world of medicine, within the burgeoning field of e-health, how precisely such illness narratives might operate in an online setting becomes a complex question. What, for example, does it mean to tell an illness narrative via sousveillance? Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted for a qualitative study into epilepsy patients’ self-representation online and on recent work in digital life writing and the medical humanities (O’Riordan, 2011; Waldby, 2000; McLellan, 1997; Arthur, 2009; Zuern, 2003; McNeil, 2012), this paper will reflect on the particularities of writing (epilepsy) lives online.

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**Paper 3**

**Gestural Excess, Gaming Style, and New Regimes of Surveillance**

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Motion gaming was popularized through the release of the Wii in 2006. The wireless Wiimote operated through a combination of a motion sensor and an infrared pointer, as well as the more traditional buttons, directional pad, and trigger. Similar devices were incorporated into the other major consoles: Sony released the PlayStation Move, a motion-sensing controller for the PlayStation 3, in 2010; the add-on Kinect was also released in 2010 for the Microsoft Xbox 360. The Kinect introduced the ‘natural’ user interface to commercial gaming. It is a ‘controller-less’ device that uses a 3D camera advanced enough to allow motion capture and facial recognition. The technologies combine to create a computer interface that can be used intuitively, through a combination of motions, movements, and gestures that are recognised by the Kinect. This device allows people to play games—and use other media—on the Xbox 360 and Windows PC through movement and voice alone, making it the contemporary gaming technology that is most intimately linked to the body. The product is incredibly popular; in the 60 days following its release the Kinect sold 8 million units, becoming the world’s ‘fastest selling consumer electronics device’ (Moses, 2011).

These platforms make use of ‘gestural excess’ (Freeman et al., 2012; Simon, 2009), the labour that is produced by the body at the location of play, but is not registered by the digital game as an input. In this gestural excess there is a nascent, but precarious, sense of *style* that formerly dissipated into everyday life, but is now indexed by popular visual culture. Gestural excess includes movements made unconsciously and those that are made deliberately as an act of ‘style’. Gesture and gestural excess in gaming have existed since the technologies’ inception—and indeed some gestures were possibly inherited from technological precursors like pinball (Huhtamo, 2005) and video art (Wilson, 2004; 2008). However, subsequent to the mass popularity of the Wii, the body of the gamer and gestural excess are increasingly understood by the digital games industry—and in the popular imagination—as an integral part of gaming. New forms of control in gaming that are based on ‘natural’ user interfaces using motion sensing, touch, and voice seem to offer a new potency for gesture. Buttons, for example, rarely mimic ‘natural’ actions or gestures (Parker, 2008; Shinkle, 2008, 908), and it is the limited recognition of human input by systems for which the player essentially remains a black box that establishes the possibility of gestural excess; it doesn’t matter how hard or fast that the button is hit. The ‘natural’ user interface, which operates through an ‘intuitive’ recognition of gesture, signals the possibility for the *recuperation* of gestural excess. This possibility is considerably enhanced by the shift toward motion-sensing gaming, which has vastly increased the capacities for gesture to be accurately tracked, recorded, and incorporated into play.

However, while motion gaming offers new possibilities for expression, it also is subject to new regimes of surveillance. This shift is largely centred around gestural excess, the movements and gestures made during play that have no effect on the algorithmic or representational processes of the game, but in advertising materials are ‘represented as the very source of fun and pleasure in the game’ (Simon, 2009, 11). The significance of gestural excess is that it is not registered by the gaming technology; it is in no way programmed or coded (Simon, 2009, 12–13). Yet once gestural excess and the body are acknowledged as significant sites, and rendered spectacular and public, they are vulnerable to new forms of surveillance (Berenhausen, 2007; Millington, 2009), not just by members of the public, but through the ever-increasing accuracy of the black-boxed technologies of gaming themselves.

Gestural excess opens new possibilities for the body to be incorporated into game play. Gestural excess always operates outside, but in relation to, computational processes, and as these processes become more efficient, and domestic motion-sensing technologies like the Xbox Kinect become more ubiquitous, the operational spaces of gestural excess will become increasingly limited. This is because the smooth operation and everyday implementation of the ‘natural’ user interface that uses the body as a controller *requires* that gestural excess is understood as a glitch. Thus, the growing significance of motion-sensing controllers suggests both an *opening and immanent foreclosure* for bodily expression in gaming through gestural excess.

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