



Vol. VIII comparative cinema
No. 14
2020

Imagining the Techno-Capitalist Society in Television and Film

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Contributors

Himar Bethencourt Reyes, Ekin Erkan, Rebecca Anne Peters, Ida Marie Schober, Joseph Walderzak and Ling Zhang.

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English language reviewer

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Original design and layout

Pau Masaló (original design), Núria Gómez Gabriel (website and PDF layouts).

Publisher

Center for Aesthetic Research on Audiovisual Media (CINEMA), Department of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF).

Place of publication

Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Communication Campus - Poblenou. Roc Boronat, 138, 08018, Barcelona (Spain).

E-mail

comparativecinema@upf.edu

Website

www.raco.cat/index.php/Comparativecinema

Comparative Cinema, Volume 8, No. 14, «Imagining the Techno-Capitalist Society in Television and Film», Barcelona, 2020.

Legal Deposit: B.29702-2012

ISSN: 2604-9821

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Cover Photo

Ex Machina (Alex Garland, 2015)

Comparative Cinema is a scientific journal that addresses film studies from a comparative perspective. It is published by the Center for Aesthetic Research on Audiovisual Media (CINEMA) at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), in Barcelona. Since its inception in 2012, it has investigated the conceptual and formal relations between films, material processes and production and exhibition practices, as well as the history of ideas and film criticism in different social and political contexts.

Comparative Cinema tackles an original area of research by developing a series of methodologies for a comparative study of cinema. With this aim, it also explores the relations between cinema and comparative literature, as well as other contemporary arts such as painting, photography, music and dance, and audio-visual media. The journal is structured into monographic issues featuring articles, interviews and the re-publishing of crucial texts, which are sometimes complemented by audio-visual essays, either as part of a written article or as an autonomous work. Each issue also includes a book review section which analyses some of the most important works in film studies published in Spain and abroad.

Comparative Cinema is published biannually in English, though it may include original versions of the texts in other languages. It is an open access, peer-reviewed publication which uses internal and external evaluation committees. As such, it is recognized by international indexes such as DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) and Latindex (Regional Information System for Online Scientific Journals of Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal).

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New forms of authoritarianism, populism, and inequality have sprung up from the core of our contemporary techno-capitalist society—from the US and Europe to China. The corporate capitalist dynamic has, further, generated an unprecedented crisis of the environmental conditions of society itself, which has led scholars to characterize the current age as the “capitalocene.” The permanent revolution of technological capitalism is throwing into question the very concept of the human, pointing towards a post-human society. The specter of dystopia is haunting our social imaginaries engendering new apocalyptic myths and narratives that have become even more relevant due to the current global pandemic.

And yet, the landscape of social imagination is plural and divided: AI, robotics, neuroscience, biogenetics, and evolutionary theory are breathing new life into eschatological and salvation myths. In this situation of historical crisis and openness, filmic imagination and its capacity to read possible futures into the “signs of times” is a privileged site of experience and reflection. After the fashion of postmodern fragmentation and playful fictionalization, there has been a flourishing of (grand) narratives drawing on scientific-technological inventions and socio-historical ideas in order to anticipate and reflect the coming post-human society. In particular, the predicament of capitalist society has generated a wave of filmic insights and

interpretations that envision possible future developments from the seeds of the present—e.g. *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011–present), *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014), *Humans* (Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley, 2015–18), *Westworld* (Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, 2016–present), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Bruce Miller, 2017–present), *3%* (Pedro Aguilera, 2016–present), or *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingtong zhi yan*, Xu Bing, 2017).

The aim of this special issue is to use the tools of cinema to engage some of the questions regarding the diagnosis of the current crisis of techno-capitalist society and its consequences: what forms of narrative and representation are used today in cinema and television to account for the present crisis of techno-capitalism? How do technological developments shape (human) relations? How are current myths (apocalyptic, salvationist, etc.) interpreted and constructed through film, and what is the role of technoscience narratives? How do technological developments shape the use of power in contemporary societies?

In her article “When Your Motherboard Replaces the Pearly Gates: *Black Mirror* and the Technology of Today and Tomorrow,” Rebecca Anne Peters considers five episodes from the anthology series *Black Mirror*. The article lays out an argument for reading the use of the

technology within the series as a reflection of Christian concepts that haunt Western culture, positing that the specters of these ideas linger in our idealized thinking of the god-like powers that technology might give us. Likewise, these concepts endure in the persecutory role that technology might play as a moral enforcer, echoing one of the dimensions of the church throughout history. To construct her argument, she considers the episodes in relation to one another and in the context of the biblical concepts they mirror—drawing from Christian theology as well as from historical and contemporary events.

In “Blaming the Poor: The False Allure of the Capitalist Critique in the Age of Postmodernism,” Joseph Walderzak discusses the question of the crisis of capitalism by focusing on three class-conscious films from recent years: *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), *Killing Them Softly* (Andrew Dominik, 2012) and *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013). These films address contemporary inequality using explicit Marxian imagery. However, as Walderzak argues following Fredric Jameson, in treating those issues as mere narrative devices, they display a postmodern aesthetics that ends up reducing antagonistic discourses to residual forms of history, preventing any truly transformative discourse oppositional to ruling class values.

In her article “Loving the AI: Captivity and Ownership in Unbalanced Dystopian Relationships,” Ida Marie Schober analyzes what she argues has become a trend in the dystopian and science fiction genre of the last years, namely, the depiction of a relationship between a lonely male human character and a female man-made AI one. She concentrates on the spatial restrictions that these AI female characters endure, resorting to recent psychoanalytic theory applied to the visual arts, as well as to Judith Butler’s developments on the institution of gender through the stylization of bodies, seeing the captivity depicted in these films as the blatant objectification of the female body. While these films are counterhegemonic in that they warn us of unsupervised creation of AI, they also reproduce the patriarchal distribution of space that has primordially functioned in the past.

“Foreshadowing the Future of Capitalism: Surveillance Technology and Digital Realism in Xu Bing’s *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017)” by Ling Zhang deals with surveillance images as they are used in Xu’s film without any manipulation, but not without editing and anesthetizing them. The result, she argues, is a new model of filmmaking only possible with contemporary developments of digital technology and media. Zhang reflects on the technological mediations of informational capitalism’s present and future. Her goal is to show that the

film delineates the contours of the social imaginary of today's capitalism, as well as its temporal coordinates. Surveillance not only connotes the idea of controlling the future, it also affects our relation to the past, to history. As the current pandemic indicates, the confrontation between the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism—based on AI and comprehensive surveillance

strategies—and the Western liberal-democratic model of capitalism will be part of the debates on the future of our societies. This crisis will most probably nourish a new wave of cinematic dystopias and utopias.¹

Camil Ungureanu, Sonia Arribas and Rebecca Anne Peters

1/ The editors want to express their gratitude to Albert Elduque for his exceptional work in helping to prepare this special issue.

When Your Motherboard Replaces the Pearly Gates: *Black Mirror* and the Technology of Today and Tomorrow

This paper considers five episodes from Charlie Brooker's dystopian science fiction anthology series, *Black Mirror* (2011–present). The episodes selected are those that—as argued in this text—depict the role of technology as replacing that of religion. To build this claim, they will be compared to one another, to the Christian biblical concepts they mirror, and to historical events related to theological debates within Christianity. Throughout the history of Western civilization, Christian belief has played an important role in shaping cultural ideologies. For that reason, it could be argued that Christian ideas continue to penetrate our cultural narratives today, despite declining self-recognition in the West as *religious* or *spiritual*. Concepts of the *afterlife*, *omniscience*, *vengeance*, *ostracism* and *eternal suffering* spring up in some of the least expected places within popular culture today. This paper argues that *Black Mirror* depicts the materialization of these concepts through imagined worlds, thus signaling the modern-day specters of Christianity.

Keywords

BLACK MIRROR
SCIENCE FICTION
DYSTOPIAN FUTURES
TECHNOLOGY
CHRISTIANITY
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

Date of reception: 04/03/2019

Date of acceptance: 28/12/2019

Rebecca Anne Peters is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher currently living and working in Barcelona where she is a doctoral candidate at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in the Department of Humanities. After completing an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2013, she went on to receive an MA in Psychosocial Studies from Birkbeck, University of London in 2014. Peters originates from the United States of America.

Religions get lost as people do.
(Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 1954)

I. Technology, *Black Mirror* and Christianity

Much has been written about the role that technology plays within contemporary culture, and its place within the *destiny* of humanity, or—according to the taste of the particular author—the history of humanity (Harari 2014; Harari 2016; Hayles 1999; Mahon 2018; Roden 2015; Wertheim 2000). In his book, *Homo Deus* (2016), Harari writes that one of humanity's aims through technology is essentially to turn ourselves into gods¹—to make humans amortal—capable of dying, but only by tragic accident, and apart from such risk, able to live forever (2016, 54). Whether this objective is achieved, however, remains to be seen. Harari sites projects such as Google's subcompany Calico, or the Gilgamesh Project, whose stated aim is to solve death (2016). Mahon instead delves into the science of CRISPR-Cas9 and gene editing as one of the most likely sites of our collective upgrade towards something *superhuman* (2018, 78). Beyond everlasting life, technology offers the possibility of other upgrades to humanity and our collective power, some of which overlap with notions of divinity (Harari, 2016). One such power would be omniscience, something big data clearly hopes to tackle sooner rather than later (among other things). Harari goes as far as to say Dataism (the worship or prioritization of data over everything else—particularly over privacy) could easily become a technoreligion of the future (2016, 428). Writing twenty years ago, Wertheim (2000) already understood the importance of cyberspace as a new space—one which many believe holds the key to everlasting life—a place in which

humanity might finally overcome the physicality of the body.

Within his dark vision of the future in *Black Mirror* (2011–present), Charlie Brooker, the show's creator, highlights a number of ways that late capitalistic societies are already using technology towards these ends, and some of the ways we might use it in the very near future. As an anthology series, each episode of *Black Mirror*, co-produced by Brooker and Annabel Jones, tells a different story, independent from the others. Instead of a traditional narrative arch, overlapping characters, and a singular world that hold together most television shows, the episodes of *Black Mirror* are connected by their overarching message, genre, and subject matter. For that reason, the show lies somewhere between television and traditional cinema. The format of *Black Mirror* itself implicitly provides the rationalization to consider its overlapping themes when analyzing the show, as we look for insight into Brooker's vision of our relationship with technology. In an interview with Channel 4 in 2014, he said that “it's a worried show, it's a show that's worried about today—even though it's often set in near futures, or sort of allegorical futures, it's really always about now, and what's going on now.”²

The episodes of *Black Mirror* take place in a future between now and, as Brooker put it, “10 minutes’ time, if we’re clumsy” (Brooker 2011). The worlds that he creates throughout the show can be described as dystopian futures, though some of the episodes could easily take place today. His overall message, as we can glean from the quotes above, is that the technologies we have, or will soon have, could bring with them grave consequences. For anyone who has seen the show, that is probably a serious understatement. I would argue, that Brooker's *Black Mirror* does not highlight the inherent dangers of technology itself, but instead



the dangerous ways that we might put that technology to use, given our current trajectory and the ways that we already use it to relate to one another and ourselves. Throughout *Black Mirror*, Brooker uses slight variations from our real relationships with technology in a way that makes alarmingly clear the dangers of our current path.

Although not overtly referencing religion, *Black Mirror* highlights questions regarding the god-like powers mentioned at the start of this section. Additionally, when we start looking at the show through the lens of Christian concepts, other parallels become clear.³ This paper will demonstrate that we can also see overlapping themes with some of the darker realities of Christianity (including notions of just punishment, ostracism, and eternal suffering). Taken together, we see the lingering specter of Christian thought, and many of its worst characteristics played out in some of the episodes of the series. These themes—of technology making humanity truly god-like or its potential to allow us to carry out the social constraints often found in religion—are not overt in all of the episodes of *Black Mirror*, but there is a strong theme throughout many of the episodes that is hard to ignore.

Harari (2016) argues that the apparent connection between the attributes of deities and the characteristics we are aiming to acquire exists not because we are haunted by religious ideas, but instead because humans have always desired those god-like qualities. He suggests that our creation of gods with super-human powers and immortality came because we wished for those things but were unable to fulfill them. In other words, we want to live forever and have super-human powers—and we always have. In the past, humanity projected these desires onto the gods; within Christianity the institution of the church decided who would have access to

eternity, but now there is no need when technology might soon bring these dreams to realization (Harari, 2016). If these were the only types of possible worlds Brooker imagined in *Black Mirror*, it might be possible to disregard the connection between religion and technology in the series as Harari's theory could be made to do.

However, while *Black Mirror* includes these “technology makes gods” manifestations (which will be considered in-depth in section II), it also considers a more problematic possible future, one that is harder to excuse as simply a timeless human desire, but instead one where technology plays the role of moral enforcer. In other words, some episodes of *Black Mirror* depict future worlds where it could be argued that technology allows for the manifestation of Christian concepts of divine punishment, ostracism, or eternal suffering. Brooker seems to be suggesting that the ghosts of Christianity are harder to shake than many would like to believe. We will consider these later examples in section III, building the argument that the series sees religion, or at least its specter, as something which continues to influence culture and the technology of today and tomorrow—and above all as something we should be weary of in its potential to impact our trajectory.

This article argues that *Black Mirror* depicts technology as a sort of replacement of religion (in this article I specifically consider Christianity), not only in the role of the Christian God, but also in the role of the church as an institution. In sections II and III, specific episodes will be analyzed for their depiction of similarities between technology and notions of divinity (section II) as well as religion as a social enforcer (section III). Likewise, I will briefly compare related current events when appropriate to help to solidify the comparisons between the technology we see in these episodes of *Black*

Mirror and the specter of religion that continues to inform Western culture today.

II. Technology makes gods

As discussed at the start of the introduction, technology's important role within the future of humanity seems obvious, but how that relationship is playing out is widely discussed and disputed among historians and philosophers alike (Harari 2014; Harari 2016; Hayes 1999; Mahon 2018; Roden 2015; Wertheim 2000). As detailed above, one of Harari's predictions is that we will collectively aim to overcome death, and that it will be among the three important goals we set out for ourselves over the next century (Harari 2014; Harari 2016). He bases his thinking on research that is already being done to extend life combined with the ease by which we already permit the use of curative treatments as preventative ones (Harari 2016, 60). Likewise, Wertheim considers cyberspace and its relationship to Christian ideas. She writes:

“... the cybernautic imagination is rapidly becoming a powerful force in its own right ... Yet, as I will suggest here, many of these fantasies are not new—in essence they are repackagings of age-old Christian visions in technological format” (2000, 21)

While considering Benedikt's *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991) and Moravec's *Mind Children* (1988) among other writing on cyberspace and its potential as a means of overcoming death, Wertheim explores the early thinking on how cyberspace might help us to overcome our mortality and asserts that these collective aims need to be explored as they could come to define the development and use of future technology (Wertheim 2000, 43).

Harari takes the argument one step further in his assertion, writing that our collective aim to overcome death is not based on spiritual ideals (for instance, gods that are immortal or the notion of a heavenly afterlife), but instead he argues that we invented gods because it was *already* our desire to conquer death. We no longer need belief in deities because we are rapidly gaining the tools to overcome death ourselves (Harari 2016). Thus, he argues that these concepts come from a common human desire, and although they seem to relate to one another (ideas about gods and our attempts towards god-like powers), this similarity is only due to their common root. This argument works when we think about positive concepts such as everlasting life or omniscience, but it runs into issues when it comes to the darker Christian concepts that will be considered later in this paper (section III).

I will first consider these positive religious concepts as they play out within *Black Mirror*, as a starting point to draw connections between the Christian concepts and the content of the show. In particular, I will start with the episode “San Junipero” (2016) as it has been tied to notions of heaven and an afterlife by both the show's creator and in academic discourse (Brooker and Jones 2018; Drage 2018; Constant 2018). Following the discussion of “San Junipero” I will also consider “Hang the DJ” (2017) and the god-like, omniscient power of big data.

Everlasting Life in “San Junipero” (2016)⁴

- Scheduled to pass.
- Let's just call it dying.
- If you can call it dying.
- Uploaded to the cloud, sounds like heaven.
- I guess.



Fig. 1: "San Junipero," *Black Mirror* (2016)

San Junipero is a virtual world that the elderly are allowed to visit for a rationed amount of time each week (usually 5 hours on a Saturday night). While visiting, they are young, and can presumably choose to spend their allotted hours in any time period they desire. In the episode we primarily see the 1980s, although we also see brief switches to the 90s and the early 2000s. Once they die, they have the choice to stay in San Junipero forever, an everlasting life of youth without death or aging; they can even turn off their pain sensors for a painless existence—at least in the physical sense. It could be called heaven on a server; it is certainly depicted that way. In the closing scene of the episode, we see a long cross fade between the experienced reality of the residents of San Junipero, and their tangible resting place—as files on a server (Fig. 1).

Drage (2018) considers San Junipero a heterotopian graveyard (in the Foucauldian sense), and though we do not take our analysis in the same direction, her consideration of “San Junipero” as depicting a sort of afterlife gives foundation to the reading of the episode in this way. Likewise, Brooker considers “San Junipero” from a similar angle saying: “I’d been obsessed with doing a story about the afterlife” (Brooker and Jones 2018).

The comparison of San Junipero to heaven is brought up in the episode itself, with one of the main characters, Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw/Denise Burse), sarcastically saying, “[u]ploaded to the cloud, sounds like heaven” while discussing the upcoming, scheduled death of the episode’s other leading lady, Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis/Annabel Davis). Likewise, the song “Heaven is a Place on Earth” by Belinda Carlisle plays both at the start and end of the episode.

The story follows Yorkie, who we first see timidly engaging with other young people in a bar in San Junipero. We later discover that she’s in a coma

and has been since her early 20s, following a car accident after a fight with her parents when she came out to them as gay. Her parents, who are deeply religious, refuse to allow her life to be ended, even though it is what Yorkie has made clear she wants. The biblical concept of an afterlife is further emphasized through Yorkie’s broken and old physical body. Christianity teaches that heaven is a place where everyone will be renewed, given new immortal bodies—that in resurrection the faithful will defeat death. This concept of transcending the physical body is also something discussed by Wertheim in her description of the potential of cyberspace, which she posits has the possibility to eliminate bias because among other things the “ageing body is hidden from view behind the screen” (2000, 25).

We can read throughout 1 Corinthians 15 about this notion of the renewal of the body—the transformation of the body in our life after death:

“The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:41-44 NIV).

Thus, we are told that death will be conquered and that after death we will be remade to be imperishable, immortal, and strong.

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling

of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor 15:51-54 NIV).

This biblical parallel to a heavenly afterlife, then, seems to be a possible reading, among others, when we consider “San Junipero.” Obviously, there are many details of the episode that contradict traditional Christian teaching, but by their contrast these details highlight the connection between the Christian conception of heaven and the one on screen. Drage’s (2018) interpretation of the episode, for example, considers more closely the same sex relationship between Yorkie and Kelly, while Constant (2018) also analyzing “San Junipero” from a Foucauldian perspective, focuses on a reading of the use of mirrors within the episode. Though the episode does not make clear all of the details of the mechanisms that make San Junipero possible, Constant (2018) briefly considers the possibility that they could hold more sinister secrets below the surface:

“... New ethical questions arise regarding surveillance in this new type of space—could San Junipero be a new ‘panopticon’? Perhaps Brooker offers one clue: in the last scene of the episode in the server room (the mirror), both Kelly and Yorkie’s discs are stamped with the letters ‘TCKR’: could this indicate that San Junipero is the product of a private corporation?” (Constant 2018, 575).

After looking at the parallels between the afterlife shown on the screen in “San Junipero” and the one described in the biblical texts, we should also consider some history regarding the church and the messy relationship between money and salvation that has plagued Christianity and caused schisms among its denominations, specifically the Catholic belief in indulgences and the prosperity gospel preached by some Protestants today.

We could consider a parallel between the episode and the abuse of indulgences within the Catholic church, which famously led to the Protestant Reformation in the early 16th century. The belief in indulgences still exists today within the Catholic Church, and Catholics can still be issued indulgences to be used for themselves or in the name of others, to avoid time spent in purgatory (Moorman 2017). Martin Luther saw abuse in the system, with clergy selling indulgences, giving those who are able to purchase salvation a means of avoiding true penance (Russell 2017).

For a modern-day example of how money and salvation come together, we might look at the prosperity gospel within the context of the United States. Generally speaking, the belief posits that those who do good, and donate money to religious causes will be blessed by God with health and wealth, a belief often preached by televangelists, and an idea taken to heart by millions of Americans (Bowler 2018). Once again, we see money coming into the equation when it comes to faith and the physical body, but this time related to our time here on earth. Not tied exclusively to one particular Protestant denomination within Christianity, the prosperity gospel instead is tied together through a common message: “God desires to bless you” as discussed by Bowler in her book, *Blessed: A History of the*

American Prosperity Gospel (2018, 6). The prosperity gospel has been heavily criticized as a means of exploiting the poor into donating money which goes to the enrichment of select church leaders, but supporters of the movement say that these church leaders should also be blessed by God and that their wealth is merely a reflection of that blessing.

In both cases, with the sale of indulgences in the Catholic Church in the early 16th century and the belief in the prosperity gospel today, we see how easy it is for money and greed to seep into Christian doctrine. It is not hard to see small glimpses of how money might also affect the virtual heaven depicted in “San Junipero.” We might only be seeing a naive perspective of this “heaven on a server” in the episode itself. The two main characters in the episode are both in very nice care facilities, Yorkie in a hospital, and Kelly in an elderly care facility. Likewise, the parts of the real world we see are clean and, in some ways, luxurious. Finally, we see that the servers hosting San Junipero and its residents are owned by a big company, TCKR Systems, as we saw highlighted earlier by Constant (2018). Might the rich be the only ones who can afford to enter the digital afterlife we see on the screen? Wertheim considers the issue of money and privilege while writing about cyberspace as a possible space for life after death:

“Just as the New Jerusalem is open to all who follow the way of Christ, so cyberspace is open to anyone who can afford a personal computer and a monthly Internet access fee ... The problem is that, unlike Heaven, access to cyberspace depends on access to technologies that for vast swathes of the world population remain firmly out of reach” (Wertheim 2000, 25).

However, as we will see later in this

article, in the world of *Black Mirror*, these digital versions of a person can coexist with the original, making them a duplicate, leading us to question whether San Junipero is truly an escape from death for the original, or if the differentiation between the two really matters.

Further exploration should be done on the concept of life after physical death within *Black Mirror*, specifically in “Black Museum” (2017) where we see technology that allows one consciousness to be embedded alongside another. Alternately, “USS Callister” (2017) shows a group of digital duplicates escaping their captive and presumably living a never-ending alternate digital life, separate from their original one. These episodes would certainly offer further insight into this theme when looking at the show as a whole.

*Omniscience through an all-knowing algorithm in “Hang the DJ” (2017)*⁵

— [DEVICE] Congratulations, Amy. Your ultimate match has been identified. Your pairing day is tomorrow.

— Ultimate as in “the one”?

— [DEVICE] That is correct.

“Hang the DJ” follows two young twenty-somethings, Amy (Georgina Campbell) and Frank (Joe Cole), as they follow a system to find their “ultimate match”—a system that boasts a 99.8% success rate. Presumably inside a dating center, the site is specifically meant to allow participants to find their match, equipped with everything they need—including temporary housing. An algorithm, or coach as it is referred to in the episode, pairs off matches for specific amounts of time, using these temporary relationships to collect data in order to identify each user’s ideal match. The two, Amy and Frank, are paired off for a brief encounter, leaving both wanting more.



Fig. 2: "Hang the DJ," *Black Mirror* (2017)



Fig. 3: "Hang the DJ," *Black Mirror* (2017)

After being paired with others for relationships of various lengths, Amy and Frank are paired with one another for a second time, and they agree not to check the designated length of their relationship as decided by the algorithm—information which users are free to access. When Frank decides he must know how long he has left with Amy, and checks the countdown timer alone, his “one sided-observation” leads to a recalibration of the relationship length—a drastically shortened time together (Fig. 2). They will have just 20 hours from what should have been five more years, and the relationship ends with a fight between the two about the broken promise.

Once again, the two are assigned new relationships, and eventually both are told that their ultimate match has been identified—and that they have not previously met the person with whom they will be matched. When they are given the chance to say goodbye to each other at the same restaurant of their first pairing, they decide that they do not want an ultimate match, but each other. They try to escape the complex, and it is revealed that they are not inside a center at all, but a simulation. The scene depicts the two scaling a wall into the heavens, and then they are just in darkness (Fig. 3).

Thus, their rebellion was an anticipated, desired response—a test. One simulation of 1,000 run on this particular couple; in 998 of those simulations they choose to escape together—thus the 99.8% success rate they are told the system has achieved. The episode ends with the two meeting in real life, having received the same near perfect match on a dating app.

Christianity ascribes many positive characteristics to their God: omniscient, all powerful, loving creator of the world. “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no

limit!” (Psalm 147:4–5 NIV). This assertion that the Christian God is omniscient, while foundational and seemingly straightforward, has caused widespread debate between religious scholars and students of theology. There are two general theories within the debate, Calvinism and Arminianism.⁶ However, in the late 20th and early 21st century, a third theory came into the spotlight, with a view of God as all-knowing, but in a different sort of way (Beilby and Eddy 2001). The new theory, Open Theism, has been so controversial that academics writing about it have been shunned from their Christian universities (Smith 2018). What could be so controversial about the theory?

Open Theism, put simply, is a belief system that views God as all-knowing in an “open” sense. Instead of knowing everything in the more classical view of omniscience, God knows both everything that has *already* happened (in a certain, closed sense) and those things that have *not yet* happened in an open sense (i.e. God knows what could happen, including every possibility and the fullness of the consequences of each possibility). The grand biblical plan is fixed or *known*, but there still remains possibility for openness, for free will: “[r]eality in other words, is composed of both settled and open aspects. Since God knows all of reality perfectly, this view holds that he knows the possible aspects as possible and knows the settled aspects as settled” (Boyd 2001, 14).

From my understanding of the theory, the basic principle is that when we come to a choice and make it, God knows beforehand the likelihood of our choosing any of the options; thus we do not surprise God with our free will, but he does not choose our actions for us either. Once we make each choice, the likelihood of our future choices is reconsidered; we

follow a different part of the spider web of knowledge, and His knowledge of our path updates, if you will. Put simply, one could argue that open theists believe that God has hacked our habits and choices—God as the ultimate collector of big data.

That being said, does the reverse hold true? Is big data god-like in some way? With knowledge of our past purchasing and viewing histories, companies like Amazon and Facebook individually target users with personalized ads. Later based on the ads you click on, or the things you go on to purchase, you will see different ads the next time you are viewing—cookies, online tracking, and device fingerprinting even mean that companies have the ability to track your habits between devices. That means that Amazon's "Recommended for you" is all-knowing in the Open Theism sense—the past is known and closed, but future choices are infinite, though with probable odds based on past behavior. This strangely similar model makes clear just one way that technology has begun to tangibly stand in for religion in the world today. With click through rates and adaptive targeting working to get us all to spend more money, we see just one way that our shift away from religion in the West manifests itself in the worship of other things. And our consumer behavior is the tip of the iceberg in the near-future dystopia anthology series *Black Mirror*.

We can see then, how the comparison between a Christian omniscient God is not such a distant concept when compared to the algorithm controlling the dating system in "Hang the DJ"—both know what has come before, and while not completely certain, both can make increasingly accurate assumptions about the future. *Black Mirror* depicts our willingness to put our full faith in data, our desire for all-knowing technology to solve our problems, and our readiness to concede

privacy for ease. Harari (2016) takes the leap to suggest Dataism might one day be, as he calls it, a techno-religion. Similarly, Wertheim discusses the fantasy of omniscience in relation to cyberspace showing us the possibility for exclusion that this worship of data might hold when asking again "who will have access to these resources?" (2000, 29).

We could equally consider the all-knowing algorithms in other *Black Mirror* episodes including "Fifteen Million Merits" (2011) or "Nosedive" (2016). Likewise, we can see the all-knowing attribute brought down to an individual level with perfect memory archives in "The Entire History of You" (2011) or "Arkangel" (2017). Each of these episodes should be considered further in the context of omniscience.

III. Technology as despot

This section will focus on the role that technology plays within *Black Mirror* as a moral enforcer—specifically considering the overlap between technology and religion on topics of public punishment, ostracism, and eternal suffering. These concepts, seemingly borrowed from Christianity, play out within *Black Mirror* highlighting the parallels between these religious ideals and notions of justice and punishment within the series.

When viewed in isolation, these episodes might seem to simply depict a future where punishment is taken just a few steps further than what we see today. It is not so hard to image these scenarios taking place in real life should such technology become available. After all, the death penalty is still widely used within the United States, and public executions in Europe were still taking place less than 100 years ago (Bessel 2015).

While many of the biblical references used throughout this section are drawn from the Old Testament, questions

regarding punishment, torture, and execution are still widely debated issues within Christianity today, as is the question of rehabilitation and reconciliation (Snyder 2000; Durrant and Poppelwell 2017; McConville 2003). These themes seem to be interpreted more on an individual basis instead of a sweeping denominational one; though the Catholic Church has recently redefined their stance on the issue of the death penalty, which has gone back and forth since the mid-20th century (Holy See Press Office 2018). That being said, it is important to acknowledge the emphasis on the Old Testament writings within this section, while acknowledging that many Christians believe they should be read in the context of the New Testament writings. Even with this consideration, as stated above, there seems to be no clear consensus on many issues surrounding punishment even when we reconsider the Old Testament read through the lens of the New Testament.

The episodes in this section encompass small details, just as the two considered in section II, that bring their content closer to these Christian concepts than simple coincidence. These details: a mob member shouting “burn in hell” or the notion that *justice* on Christmas is particularly satisfying, highlight the minute details that could be used to justify the reading of these episodes as more than just coincidentally similar to Christian concepts. The following subsections will consider the *Black Mirror* episodes “White Bear” (2013), “White Christmas” (2014) and “Men Against Fire” (2016).

Public punishment for the wicked in “White Bear” (2013)⁷

— [news coverage] The jury was not convinced by Skillane’s story and neither was the judge, who labeled her a uniquely wicked and poisonous individual. “You were an enthusiastic

spectator to Jemima’s suffering. You actively reveled in her anguish” he said... adding her punishment would be proportionate and considered. By hanging himself in his cell, many believe Iain Rannoch evaded justice. The public mood is now focused on ensuring his accomplice can’t do the same. Patrick Lacey, UKN.

— [wailing]

— Oh, don’t start crying. Crocodile tears are making me sick!

— [audience] Murderer! Murderer!

Presumably after a failed suicide attempt, Victoria Skillane (Lenora Crichlow) wakes up in a house she does not recognize, without any recollection of who she is, or any of the specifics of her life. However, she quickly realizes that she has found herself in a world of chaos and violence. She comes to discover that a radio signal transmitted through cellular phones has made a large portion of the population docile and only interested in recording the actions of others on their mobile devices. Most alarmingly however, those not affected by the radio signal have fallen into two different groups: those who are seizing the opportunity to take advantage of others (through torturing and killing), and those who do not wish to harm others but instead are preyed upon (it is suggested that they are more mentally vulnerable).

Throughout her attempt to flee the situation, Skillane witnesses horrific things, and is nearly murdered a number of times. Finally, she and her newfound guide, Jem (Tuppence Middleton), arrive at the radio tower Jem plans to burn down, and Skillane is forced to shoot at one of the attackers pursuing them. At this pivotal moment, in full theatrical revelation, the viewer (along with Skillane herself) discovers that everything in the episode up until that point has been a highly fabricated fiction—a daily punishment for



Skillane's role in the murder of a small girl. Skillane is shown the details of the murder, along with the audience (both the viewers of the episode, and those of the spectacle itself). Finally, she is taken to be harassed publicly and then to have her memory erased—an event that is extremely painful and happens daily. During the credits we find out that her punishment is marketed and attended as a sort of theme park of justice, where the public can come to participate and witness Skillane's fate.

Skillane's memory is erased every evening, and she is forced to live the same terrifying day over and over as punishment for her crimes. For most of each day, she doesn't know who she is, or even what she has done. In the episode they mention that Skillane's boyfriend "evaded justice" by killing himself—as detailed in the dialogue from the episode used as the opening of this subsection. Thus, death is not enough; instead what is desired is public punishment and public shaming—the lure of the stocks, pillories, and public executions. But alarmingly, we see that it does not matter whether she remembers committing the crime or whether she feels sorrow for what she has done when she discovers it—it is not about penance or rehabilitation, it is about punishment and retribution.

In "White Bear" the idea of divine justice is played out within the law through the use of technology as a form of public punishment. When Skillane is driven back to the house where she will once again begin her punishment the following day, mobs of spectators yell at her, throw things at the clear trailer she is transported in, and the whole event is part of the experience of the theme park—all sensationalized led by the theme park employees. We hear people shouting "Murderer!" and "Burn in hell!"—a further detail supporting the idea that Brooker is himself troubled by these specters of Christianity,

particularly in relation to notions of justice.

This religious element within criminal justice is something we have seen throughout the history of Christianity, however. Jones and Johnstone write:

"The roots of Western civilization reach deep into antiquity, as do the problems of crime and punishment ... The vast treasury of the Bible provides a rich heritage of history, theology and philosophy that has had a persistent impact upon modern society" (2015, 15).

The long and intertwined relationship between religion and criminal justice has roots that span history dating back to biblical Israel and continuing through today.

"Of course, there is a moral dimension to the definition of crime ... It [religious belief] has been, and in many societies continues to be, the major source of ethical and behavioral rules. Not surprisingly, when legislators or judges participate in the lawmaking process, they are strongly influenced by their religious beliefs. Every rule or criminal law thus has a moral dimension derived in large measure from cultural views concerning theology" (Jones and Johnstone 2015, 9).

Then, it is no large leap to suggest that the creation of technology meant to punish those who have committed crimes, might also reflect a religious element or mirror biblical punishment. We will look at colonial forms of public punishment later in this section and consider the church's role in punishment.

Convicted of murder, Skillane lives the same day over and over again in



Fig. 4: "White Bear," *Black Mirror* (2013)

an amusement park created to carry out justice, yet because she does not remember the event itself, or even who she is, there is no ability for penance, as was often the aim of punishment when using the stocks or pillories. Instead, it is meant as a form of public control, a warning to others, and a means of perpetual torture in this life, presumably because it will not be carried out in the next, as religion teaches. This detail is also supported by the notion that suicide is depicted as a means of evading justice in the episode. That being said, this episode might also be considered from the perspective of eternal suffering, because Skillane is being punished in the same way day after day. However, the theme park's voyeuristic feel seems more in keeping with the notion of public punishment when we consider the history of Christianity. We will, however, consider the question of eternal suffering later in the subsection on "Men Against Fire."

The first book of the Bible lays the groundwork for the concepts of capital punishment. "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind" (Genesis 9:6 NIV). Later in the Old Testament, public punishment is considered just. "The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you" (Deuteronomy 17:7 NIV). It is also important to distinguish in this case, however, between death and punishment, as we see that in the imagined future in "White Bear," death is not enough, and not the aim. The aim is retribution and we know this because they consider Skillane's accomplice to have evaded justice through death.

Further, we see that part of the test for what is to be viewed as an acceptable punishment is whether a judge—the final word on the matter—decides it:

"When people have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. If the guilty person deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make them lie down and have them flogged in his presence with the number of lashes the crime deserves, but the judge must not impose more than forty lashes. If the guilty party is flogged more than that, your fellow Israelite will be degraded in your eyes" (Deuteronomy 25:1-3 NIV).

Later in the New Testament, we see that God grants authority to the state with regards to punishment:

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:1-4 NIV).

We also see in Job 34:26-27: "He punishes them for their wickedness where everyone can see them, because they turned from following Him and had no regard for any of his ways" (NIV). Thus, we can see that the



concept of public punishment and torture is not only an ugly pock on the history of humanity, but something condoned throughout the Bible itself. Though there is a movement towards viewing punishment as a means of rehabilitation, that has not always been the case. If the culture of the time, in the case of the episode an imagined future with the technology for punishment of the kind depicted in “White Bear,” has a criminal justice system which seeks retribution, and has the institutional authority to carry it out, a theme park of justice, as we see in this episode, somehow seems like a logical conclusion. Though Jesus called for turning the other cheek and loving one’s enemies, he also suggests that those who do evil will rise to be condemned by his father (Matthew 5:38-48; John 5:29 NIV). If humans have become god-like through the use of technology, as we saw in the previous section, the role of god-like judge might also be one of those new powers, gained through technology and desired just as much as eternal life or omniscience.

As Skillane is put on display for the sake of derision, it is hard not to compare the practice to pillories or other forms of public punishment common to New England colonial life (Earle, [1896] 1995). We see Skillane booed and jeered at, told to “burn in hell,” all while restrained to a wooden chair (Fig. 4). The comparison between the means of social control used by the Christian church of the time and the social control played out within the episode are startlingly clear: the wicked should be punished, and the righteous should play a role on the process; evil should be “purged” and let it be a warning to others. While discussing the idea of torture within the episode, Annabel Jones said, “[t]he focus is very much on how we bring people to justice and what outrages we can do if we feel we’re morally justified” (Brooker and Jones 2018, 87).

Speaking of God’s judgment and the just punishment for the wicked on earth, David writes in Psalm 58: 10-11, “[t]he righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked. Then people will say, ‘Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth’” (NIV). This concept of the righteous dipping their feet in the blood of the wicked seems particularly apt for the concept of public punishment in “White Bear,” where the mob revels in the drama of the penance—for the theatrics just as much as the *justice* of it, as we saw was also the case in the discussion of colonial life above.

Other episodes that question concepts surrounding the role of public humiliation or judgment as a social control might include “The National Anthem” (2011), “Shut Up and Dance” (2016) or even “Crocodile” (2017). However, “White Bear” is the most relevant for this discussion given the combination of public punishment, criminal justice, and its near mirroring of Christian punishment in early colonial America.

Outcast, damned and condemned in “White Christmas” (2014)⁸

- What does it mean, this register?
- It means you’re blocked.
- By who?
- By everyone.

In “White Christmas” the characters live in a world where everyone has Z-Eyes (a device that connects users with the internet directly through their field of vision). The episode is made up of a series of stories within a larger one. After a bizarre turn of events in which one of his clients dies, Matt (Jon Hamm) a “dating coach” by night and “cookie”





Fig. 5: "White Christmas," *Black Mirror* (2014)



Fig. 6: "White Christmas," *Black Mirror* (2014)

specialist by day, assists police in helping them to get a confession in return for avoiding a jail sentence. Cookies are digital duplicates of a person—a microchip imbedded just below the skin near the temple that absorbs information and duplicates the consciousness of the individual. The technology in the episode is commercially used to basically function like a perfect smart house/personal assistant. Your digital copy works making everything just the way you like it—and they would know how, they are a perfect copy of you (a duplicate much like the digital versions we saw in “San Junipero”). Matt’s job is to convince or coerce these duplicates into playing the role they have been created for. Matt’s deal to help the police involves his coercion of another such cookie; this time he needs to get a confession from Joe (Rafe Spall) who was driven to murder after a series of events following a breakup, and his subsequent blocking by his ex-partner. However, at the end of the episode, although police hold up their end of the deal—with no jail time—Matt gets registered as a sex offender, and with the Z-Eye technology this means that others only see him as an ominous red blob (Fig. 5). He can no longer interact with anyone else, seeing others simply as “blocked” or greyed out blurs (Fig. 6). Essentially, Matt is ostracized.

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 5 we see Paul instruct the church to cast out those who are amoral; he writes: “[d]o not even eat with such people” and later, “God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked person from among you’” (1 Corinthians 5 NIV). This last expelling advice referring back to Deuteronomy, where the concept of purging the evil from the group is encouraged:

“That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt

and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 13:5 NIV).

Elsewhere in Deuteronomy we see the same notion of purging, expelling, or casting out:

“They shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid” (Deuteronomy 21:20-21 NIV).

Z-Eyes in “White Christmas” let people see their virtual connections through their field of vision, but it also means that those who are deemed criminals can be blocked from sight and sound, through technological ostracism, to help others keep a distance. Matt is even singled out as someone not just blocked, but outcast—his blur appears red to everyone who sees him. This technology, while on the surface seems far-fetched, is reflected in contemporary culture and the criminal justice system today; in many places in the United States sex offenders, of all types, are on public registries which include their addresses. Likewise, they are prohibited from living in many places, particularly within certain distances of schools and playgrounds; this also includes sex offenders who committed crimes that had nothing to do with children (McCullagh 2009).

More recently, some states within the United States have prohibited sex offenders from using social media as part of their parole conditions (McCullagh 2009). Today, this is the

equivalent of ostracism. No LinkedIn to look for jobs; not even any news websites because their comment features could be considered social media. More recently, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the complete prohibition of social media use is unconstitutional because it limits the freedom of speech of the individual, similarly the UK ruled such laws as an unreasonable intrusion on civil liberties (Liptak 2017; Dalesio 2017; Thomson 2012). It is unclear the exact way the new US ruling will impact previous laws, but there is clearly public sentiment to push these individuals to the margins of society, one way or another. Of the punishment for Matt in "White Christmas" Brooker said, "[a] bit like someone with a conviction on their record, which you'd see if you were Googling them to employ them. So it's a hellish representation of that going on in real time" (Brooker and Jones 2018, 121). We see, similarly to the subsection above on "White Bear," that both forms of punishment, public torture and ostracism, aided by new technology become within the grasp of humanity on a new level, on par with an all-powerful god.

Other details in the episode are likewise interesting to consider through the lens of Christianity. The song, "I wish it could be Christmas every day" plays both at the beginning and end of the episode within the simulated world where Joe's cookie and Matt trade stories and where eventually, the stories that brought them both to where they are come out. Later, one police officer, when leaving for the day, changes the settings on the cookie, leaving Joe's digital duplicate in a digital purgatory alone, passing what will feel like a thousand years a minute. Their dialogue is as follows: "Just changing the time settings. Cranked him up to 1,000 years a minute. There's a proper sentence. Or do you want me to switch him off?" The other: "No. Leave him on

for Christmas." Somehow, this sense of divine justice is considered even more satisfying on Christmas. Of this detail, Brooker said "[h]e's basically in a hell" (Brooker and Jones 2018, 121). Stuck in a perpetual nightmare, Joe's duplicate is heard screaming as the episode finishes. Another small detail that lets us know Brooker is thinking about these connections between the use of technology within the justice system in *Black Mirror* alongside biblical notions of justice.

This concept of eternal suffering will be considered in the next subsection through the study of a different episode that considers the concept more concretely because of its use as a threat to social compliance. Other episodes that reflect this idea of being socially ostracized, at least from a certain vantage point, might include "Shut up and Dance" (2016) or "Nosedive" (2016), though "White Christmas" has the most concrete use of the concept throughout the series.

*Eternal Suffering in "Men Against Fire" (2016)*⁹

- Is this what you want? On a loop?
In a cell all alone?
- [whimpers]
- We can make that go away.

Seeing the world through the technological enhancements of their military implants, called MASS, the main characters in "Men Against Fire" are a group of soldiers fighting against an infestation of "roaches" (short for cockroaches), terrifying screeching monsters with waxy skin and pointed teeth. The military implants help the soldiers to have otherwise superhuman powers—they can see directly through drone camera, they are able to see blueprints of buildings, and they see their mission details—all without doing a thing. However, after a round of cleaning up cockroaches,





Fig. 7: "Men Against Fire," *Black Mirror* (2016)



Koinange (Malachi Kirby), nicknamed Stripe, starts having problems with his MASS, and he begins to realize that his enhancements are a little more extensive than he realized. They inhibit his ability to smell, his ability to hear everyday details, and most importantly, they create the illusion of the monstrous roaches—blocking out the screams and adding screeches, limiting the smell of blood and death and changing the faces of normal humans to something of nightmares—all to eradicate “bad blood.” Koinange’s captain puts it this way: “the sickness they’re carrying. That doesn’t care about the sanctity of life or the pain about who else is going to suffer.”

Described as his “war movie,” “Men Against Fire” certainly shows us a side to war: the dehumanization of the enemy, the constant attempt to create soldiers who are not “weakened” by their humanity and empathy, and most importantly the absurdity as to where we draw lines between ourselves—how we justify our constant desire to eradicate the other. Brooker asks us to look within ourselves at the end of the episode when Stripe is offered the choice to suffer on a loop, reliving the murders he unknowingly committed, or to get it all erased and keep killing. Would we, if we found ourselves in the same situation, live in a constant loop, reliving the real footage of a series of murders unknowingly committed, or instead go back to seeing things simply as human versus monster? It seems like an impossible decision. However, in the end, there is only one choice we are likely to make. Though the seemingly moral decision would be to stop the killing, to live with what we have done, it is rendered unimaginable by the constant re-play made possible by the technology implanted into the soldier’s eyes and sensory input.

In “Men Against Fire” we see never-ending, immersive punishment on a loop for a soldier who refuses to be

compliant (Fig. 7). We can see that eternal suffering is a deterrent; it works as a means of control. “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 NIV). Then, in the episode the concept of eternal suffering is not inflicted with the same criteria as described in the Bible, but with the same goal—compliance.

If we consider the use of this kind of torture as a means of compliance, we can see how it connects back to the use of ostracism as an assertion of group norms as considered in the last subsection. The three forms of punishment in *Black Mirror* considered in this article each have slightly different aims, but all reflect the assuming of god-like powers by society as a means of social control. Though the church has played a role in social control throughout the history of Christianity, much like many other religions, suddenly we see a world where compliance can be sought for less than pure motives, as is the case in “Men Against Fire.” It is as if Brooker is asking us in each episode relating to punishment, “Does this person deserve to be punished in *this* way?” while making us less and less sure of our answers each time.

The depiction of the enemy as beast-like is not far from biblical concepts of eternal suffering either.

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and

of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name” (Revelation 14:9-11 NIV).

Likewise, the doubling of the same footage with and without the filter of the MASS implant reinforces the demonization of the undesirable people, we see them first as they are imagined through the society in the episode, and then as they would appear to us. We could relate this to any number of mass killings and genocides in which propaganda was meant to demonize the “undesirable” other. Likewise, the killing of “witches” in colonial America might also serve as an interesting comparison given the hysteria seen in both the episode and the historical events. Though the average villagers in the episode cannot distinguish roaches from normal people, they are unwilling to even eat the food that might have been touched by them; this level of hysteria and mass illusion of difference is on par with the hysteria seen in the witch trials run by religious puritans.

Other episodes that touch on this concept of eternal suffering include, as mentioned above, “White Bear” (2013) and “White Christmas” (2014), but other episodes like “USS Callister” (2017) and “Black Museum” (2017) also bring up the idea in regards to future uses of technology related to suffering.

IV. Conclusion

Taken together, the five episodes of *Black Mirror*, as considered in this article build an interesting argument towards the consideration of the relationship between technology and the traditional role of religion. The television series as a whole explores our

obsession with, and trust in, technology. It also looks at how that trust can easily break down into a future where technology is no longer a tool, but a mechanism of control.

We have seen that beyond the five episodes discussed in this article, there are numerous others that could be examined for their relationships to the Christian concepts highlighted. Likewise, each episode deserves further analysis through this framework in much greater depth. It is important to emphasize again that this article was by no means attempting to exhaustively analyze all possible interpretations of *Black Mirror* in regards to the question of the specter of religion; instead, the aim has been to map an argument as to why the show might be contemplated using this model, as a general framework of consideration.

It seems clear that when viewed together, this grouping of episodes from *Black Mirror* asks questions about the relationship between seemingly abandoned Christian concepts, and our potential uses of technology. Together they build a convincing argument that Brooker himself asks these questions about the specter of religion. So, what is to prevent us from following the same path as the societies in some of the *Black Mirror* episodes considered here? Brooker seems to be telling us that not much stands in our way, technologically or culturally speaking. Everlasting life, predicting the future—those things could be great; but on the other hand, public punishment, ostracism, and eternal suffering do not hold the same lure. Technology, as we have seen throughout these episodes of *Black Mirror*, as well as in the world around us, holds great potential, but it also holds dangerous possibilities as well.

- 1/ Throughout this text the capitalized God will be used to refer specifically to the biblical Christian deity, whereas god or gods will be used in the rare instances where the concept of a deity in a more general sense is considered.
- 2/ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2YPxSDloPE> [accessed March 23, 2020]
- 3/ For these reasons, this paper will use Christian concepts instead of those from other religions, although it is possible that these comparisons could be made using other belief structures as the point of comparison. In addition, when considering a concept that is exclusive to a particular branch within Christianity (Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Christianity, etc.) the denominational reference will be given to clarify that it is a concept particular to a specific branch. Largely, the focus of this paper will be placed on Western Christian concepts specific to Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as the many denominations considered to fall within Protestant belief.
- 4/ Episode directed by Owen Harris. First aired on Netflix on October 21, 2016.
- 5/ Episode directed by Tim V. Patten. First aired on Netflix on December 29, 2017.
- 6/ Put simply Calvinists believe that the only logical way for God to be all-knowing is for him to have preordained all of history, in other words and quite crudely put, there are those who have been elected to be saved, and those who have not—the damned; they argue that this preordained history does not exclude free will. On the other side of the argument, Arminianists, believing that the Calvinist model lacks the notion of true free will, instead advocate for a model of God outside of time as a possible means to reconcile the combination of an all-knowing God and true free will. Thus, God can be understood to be omniscient because for him everything is happening simultaneously, since he is outside of time; in this way, the idea of an all-knowing God and free will can co-exist.
- 7/ Episode directed by Carl Tibbets. First aired on Channel 4 on February 18, 2013.
- 8/ Episode directed by Carl Tibbets. First aired on Channel 4 on December 16, 2014.
- 9/ Episode directed by Jakob Verbruggen. First aired on Netflix on October 21, 2016.

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Blaming the Poor: The False Allure of the Capitalist Critique in the Age of Postmodernism

This article considers *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012) in order to argue through Fredric Jameson that postmodern aspects of a text are capable of obfuscating, if not altogether obliterating, any Marxist polemics. The first portion engages with Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, particularly his emphasis on class struggle and identification of ideologemes which manifest in the text. The subsequent section considers *The Dark Knight Rises* as a postmodern text through Jameson's concepts of pastiche and nostalgia. Moreover, *The Dark Knight Rises* is contextualized within the recent spate of class-oriented cinema. Collectively, the goal is to identify a trend within such films of establishing a correlation between capitalism and inequality, ideologemes and postmodernism. The final result is an increasingly impressive group of genre-spanning films which address contemporary inequality in its multifarious forms, but which treat these issues more so as narrative devices than tenable critiques of the sites of oppression.

Keywords

FILM STUDIES
FREDRIC JAMESON
CLASS ANALYSIS
SCIENCE FICTION FILMS
GENRE STUDIES
MARXIST ANALYSIS
CLASS IDEOLOGY
FILM ANALYSIS

Date of reception: 16/02/2019

Date of acceptance: 28/12/2019

Joseph Walderzak is a faculty member at Adrian College. He also frequently teaches courses in film studies throughout the metro Detroit area. His scholarship most often focuses on gender and class across particular film genres. His work on the teen film genre was recently published in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and his work on the damsel within the superhero genre has been published in journals and anthologized. He is working on a book manuscript concerning representation of women detectives on television from 1980–2010.

Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" concludes by questioning whether texts produced in the age of postmodernism—a paradigm Jameson posits replicates and reinforces "the logic of consumer capitalism"—has the capacity to resist those very forces (Jameson 1963, 1860). Putting aside the facetiously rhetorical nature of Jameson's query, one only has to explore Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* to find a methodology which implicitly anticipates and answers Jameson's quandary. Through viewing Marxist criticism as the "ultimate semantic precondition for the intelligibility of literary and cultural texts," Jameson establishes an analytical approach capable of identifying the resistant elements of a postmodern text (1981, 75). Therefore, Jameson's Marxist analysis and his postmodern pessimism provides a theoretical antinomy which, rather paradoxically, jointly deployed forms a vital methodology for approaching texts which contain explicit Marxist imagery yet provide dichotomous interpretations from scholars and critics unable to reconcile the resistant narrative elements from those aspects (or denouements) which reinforce capitalist values. Over the last decade, the class-conscious film—a term used liberally to describe films with explicit or explicitly allegorical class-based narratives—has proliferated across an array of genres. These films provide narratives which reify Jameson's Marxist analysis as much as they illuminate his concerns over a postmodern "society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (Jameson 1981, 1860). I consider *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), the most commercially successful of the recent blitz of class-conscious cinema, in order to argue through Jameson that the postmodern aspects of a text are capable of obfuscating, if not

altogether obliterating, any Marxist polemics. Scholars who proffer contradictory narrative interpretations of class-conscious films—Marxist frequently identify how explicitly foregrounding class inequality often upholds the ruling discourse of consumer capitalism—would benefit from identifying how these contradictions are often the result of its postmodern aesthetics.¹

To prove such a contention, this article is divided along two theoretical impulses. In the first portion, I engage with Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, particularly his emphasis on class struggle and the identification of ideologemes which manifest in the text. In the subsequent portion, I position *The Dark Knight Rises* as a postmodern text through Jameson's concepts of pastiche and nostalgia as described in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." Moreover, I contextualize *The Dark Knight Rises* within the recent spate of class-oriented cinema through an analysis of two highly representative films: the gangster allegory *Killing Them Softly* (Andrew Dominik, 2012) and the post-apocalyptic thriller *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013). Collectively, the goal is to identify a trend within such films of establishing a correlation between capitalism and inequality, ideologemes and postmodernism. Yet, equally present is a causation between heroism and capitalism, particularly the tenets of self-reliance, ingenuity, and economic ascendancy. The final result is an increasingly large group of genre-spanning films which address contemporary inequality in its multifarious forms, but which treat these issues more so as narrative devices than tenable critiques of the sites of oppression. Ultimately, this somewhat bifurcated approach is only as successful as its ability to illustrate the deleterious relationship between postmodernism and representations of class struggle.

The foregrounding of Jameson's scholarship is not in itself an effort to avoid contemporary debates on class analysis, although I recognize that the majority of these debates fall into niche discussions on issues such as nostalgia and historical memory that lack relevancy to this specific matter. Rather, this work is interested in illuminating how Jameson's theories—many of which are foundational to class analysis of cinema—require new attention in a moment in which there is a surfeit of contemporary scholarship on class in film. As textual film analysis becomes increasingly preoccupied with issues of identity, the topic of class is often severed from these discussions. In other cases, class is subordinate to issues of race and sexuality in understanding and criticizing representational politics. This ancillary position of class is perhaps inevitable given the importance and relevance of identity politics; this analysis should not be viewed as severed from these debates but rather offers a more developed and refined look at how critiques of capitalism are often flawed. This article's greatest ambition resides in its ability to construct a method for acknowledging how postmodernism affects and limits all forms of cultural critique within cinema. Therefore, Jameson's relevancy is not restricted to the intersection of class politics and cinema but applies equally to any progressive narrative element which is contradicted by postmodern aesthetics. Moreover, the current socio-political moment, with rising inequality and pervasive cultural division, is not at all unlike the 1980s; if ever there was a moment to resurrect and revisit texts that have been presumably embedded into contemporary thought, it would be such moments where history appears hopelessly cyclical.

To a certain extent, any film which grosses over a billion dollars—with the advertising that requires and the

cross media ventures it implies—is unlikely to form a cohesive ideology oppositional to the economic and political paradigm which produced the text. Jameson plainly summarizes this predicament by arguing that texts which survive usually uphold the ruling voice; a product designed to make money, no matter its artistic attributes, inherits and embraces the economic and political discourses of its creation. Therefore, it is not the text itself—the apotheosis of consumer capitalism—that can provide antagonist dialogue, but through a narrative that has the potential to contest and undermine ruling class ideology rather than seek legitimization. David Brooks expands on this dynamic when claiming "cinema is the supreme maker and manipulator of images," but "mimetic qualities of cinema of this sort are extraordinary revealing;" postmodern films "must self-consciously embrace the problem of image creation" (2013, 323). *The Political Unconscious* provides three Marxist methodological horizons to explore a text: the allegorical or symbolic act, the collective class discourse, and the mode of production. *The Dark Knight Rises* operates most notably as part of the collective class discourse, a part which consists of what is identified by Jameson as ideologemes that, in combination, form an ideology of form. For Jameson, the ideologeme is the smallest unit of the struggle between the classes that contributes to the antagonistic discourse (1981, 76). The film text itself is an ideologeme but more fundamental is an analysis of scenes which repeatedly engage with concepts of class conflict. *The Dark Knight Rises'* primary ideologeme involves the dichotomy between rich and poor, a bifurcated presentation of social classes which aligns with Jameson's interpretation of Marx.

Importantly, the film's villains are frequently the voice of the oppressed.



Fig. 1: Students make the letter "W" to extol the leader Wilford, as members of the working class migrate towards the engine. *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013)



Fig. 2: In *Snowpiercer*'s denouement, Curtis is left to recognize the complicity of the working class with the ruling class, while serving as a spectator to the aimless brutality. *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013)

Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway), the thief better known as Catwoman, challenges Bruce Wayne's, the hero Batman (Christian Bale), ruling class values. She justifies her legerdemain by positing that, "I take what I need from those who have more than enough." Later in her exchange with Wayne, she threatens that, "you're all going to wonder how you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us." Elsewhere, after Wayne has been swindled out of his fortune but is left his enormous estate, Kyle quips the "rich don't even go broke like the rest of us." The film's primary villain, Bane (Tom Hardy), likewise questions the morality of how wealth is amassed. When invading a stock exchange, an investor condescendingly explains to Bane that there is no money to be stolen to which he replies, "Really? Then why are you people here?" After Bane has gained control of Gotham, the financial backer he has duped with promises of pathways to greater financial power attempts to assert his control by claiming that he has paid Bane a small fortune to which he retorts—only seconds before executing him—"And this gives you power over me?" Later, with Bane's hold on the city established, further wealthy cronies are sentenced to death for "living off the blood and sweat of others," a presumably intentional reference to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation.

If *The Dark Knight Rises'* villains espouse Marxist views, the reversal in the post-apocalyptic action film *Snowpiercer* would ostensibly gratify the desire for class ideologemes. Mason (Tilda Swinton), the film's most visible villain, pontificates on how everyone must abide to the eternal order and "occupy our preordained particular position." If Bane and Selina Kyle paraphrase Marx, then Mason similarly borrows from Weber's Protestant Work Ethic. Mason, when attempting to stymy the rebellion

which propels the film's narrative, speaks of the "misplaced optimism of the doomed" and provides a perfect aphorism for the American Dream. *Snowpiercer's* villains are not pedaling the myths of capitalist society but rather present it as the only option and the system which best conforms to human capacity. Focusing on the only survivors of an environmental catastrophe who are left bound to a train, the only alternative to the train's economic system is presented as an almost immediate death in frigid temperatures. The passengers of the back of the train, who labor in squalid conditions for slimy black bars of "protein" and face violent oppression from Mason's cronies, forge ahead with a plan to revolt and take power over the "engine;" the failure to do so has doomed all past revolutions the audience is told. The allegorical antagonistic elements of the ideologeme become instantly clear: Mason is the ruling class; the last train, led by Curtis (Chris Evans), is the proletariat; the engine is the capitalist system. The vast majority of the film follows the logic of class warfare. Each subsequent car in the train is more lavish and hedonistic, providing a new facet of capitalist society to dissect and critique. Curtis' followers are exposed to food they thought no longer existed and comforts they could hardly imagine (saunas and hot tubs). The ideologeme formed in a classroom towards the head of the train proves remarkably cogent as it identifies how the educational system brazenly inculcates students on the virtues of the "engine" (again, capitalism) and beatifies its inventor and target of the revolt, the mysterious Wilford (Ed Harris) (Fig. 1).

Even if each new ideologeme is left segmented between interspersions of sustained choreographed violence (in a style extremely reminiscent of fellow South Korean filmmaker Chan-

wook Park's *Oldboy* [Oldeuboi, 2003]), the persistence of the antagonism overshadows these diversions. In fact, the violent interludes may help to reduce the potentially maladroit character of the ideologemes. It is a necessary respite for those who find these sections—much like the aforementioned classroom car scene—pedantic and overtly political. What disrupts the clear procession of ideologemes from coalescing into a class-conscious film, is the film's climatic confrontation between Curtis and Wilford which demonstrates either a lack of commitment to the film's ideology in favoring the thrill of an illogical plot twist, or exemplifies the postmodern film in that the previous ideologemes are merely hollow provocation. For Wilford confides to Curtis that he had devised and orchestrated the revolt—and previous failed iterations—with Gilliam (John Hurt), Curtis' frail mentor and the leader of the back of the train. Wilford uses the revolt as a population purge to expedite natural selection. In partnership with Gilliam, Wilford is able to maintain the proper mix of "anxiety and fear" to control the population. With this revelation, and because of the steady train (if, I may) of ideologemes, Gilliam's involvement is tantamount to the proletariat being complicit with the ruling class that subordinates them. Before one can imagine a reading that is less subversive, Wilford and Curtis watch as people viciously attack one another. Calmly, Wilford comments, "that's who people are" (Fig. 2). The interpretation, if there deserves to be one, is clear: capitalism is the only option because it best caters to the depravity that is human nature. Thus, the audience is bestowed not an antagonistic ideologeme but an all too familiar refrain. One is left only to imagine a narrative twist which revealed Wilford to be a fraud and that his life-saving prowess of engineering,

glorified in the train's classroom, was nothing more than another act of exploitation. Tellingly, the only two who see the potential for life beyond the train are a couple who open the doors of the train in exchange for a drug, which keeps them in a stupor and ultimately provides their freedom.

Killing Them Softly may deal in ideologemes of capitalist inequality with an audacious lack of subtlety but its audacity similarly fails to conjure a cohesive polemic. Using the context of the 2008 recession, the film deploys the gangster formula as a parallel for the American political and economic system; in short, American capitalism is tantamount to living in a gangster film where the only means of survival are brutality, depravity, and cheating. The last lines of the film, recited by a sympathetic hit-man (Brad Pitt) while watching Obama's inauguration and anticipating every hackneyed adage, succinctly encapsulate the film: "This guy [Obama] wants to tell me we're living in a community. Don't make me laugh. I'm living in America and in America you're on your own. America's not a country; it's just a business. Now fucking pay me." The juxtaposition between the gangster narrative and the news coverage of the economic turmoil of 2008 ubiquitously characterizes the film: during an armed robbery President Bush gives a speech about economic collapse; while a pair of mobsters talk about maintaining the "public image," Ben Bernanke is heard over the radio speaking on maintaining confidence in financial systems; prior to embarking on the film's penultimate murder, Bush speaks on how America has the most talent in the world. This pervasive juxtaposition is provocative and seemingly the antagonistic relationship between news coverage and gangster film tropes would result in an irreproachable ideologeme. Rather than creating a dialectical montage with these conflicting elements, however,

the film parades its allegorical imagery in sophist pageantry. The two criminals whose robbery initiates the film's plot are characterized as desperate equally as they are as incompetent and indolent. These are hardly sympathetic characters who are the victims of the American economic system which imbues the films diegesis. If the gangster film is an allegory for the American corporate capitalism, it is striking how this is the exceptional gangster film absent non-mob victims, spouses, or children. *Killing Them Softly* provides a hermetically sealed gangster environment that eschews the cultural context necessary to form an ideologeme. The dogged efforts to juxtapose organized (or, perhaps, hierachal) crime and politicians ultimately proves reactionary. At the moment when every character in the diegetic and non-diegetic world is corrupt or immoral, while being severed from the context of the cause of suffering, what room is there to explore the class antagonism essential to the ideologeme. David Harvey observes that "the reduction of art to a test stressing discontinuity and allegory, poses all kinds of problems for aesthetic and critical judgment" (1990, 56). Unlike *Snowpiercer*'s unique allegory that is only somewhat distorted by its environmental cautionary tale, allegory which must conform to the rigid structures of genre formula reduces capitalist inequality to forms bound by those very formulae.

To return to *The Dark Knight Rises*, Kyle and Bane justify their criminality through the rational of pervasive inequality; their actions are legitimized through articulating a class view that echoes Jameson's (1981) interpretation of Marx in which sociological subgroups are jettisoned in favor of a dichotomy of rulers and oppositions. In this case, the overtly simplistic dichotomy between heroes and villains in comic books films lends

itself well to a Marxist discourse. What is problematic and what has inspired drastically different interpretations of Batman films generally is that the oppositional forces—those who are identifying the inequality of the capitalist system—are the villains of the film. A few notable exceptions exist such as when the, albeit meek and cowardly, Police Captain (Mathew Modine) refuses to risk his men to save "someone else's money" during the stock market siege. However, the film does consistently put the oppositional language in the mouths of the film's villains. Whether this means the film is implicitly endorsing ruling class values through associating them with the film's titular hero or simply marginalizing the opposition to the voice of villains in order to characterize its position in society is a site of confusion that Jameson's ideologeme fails to entirely rectify. Furthermore, the sympathetic nature of the villains—Kyle becomes an ambivalent hero by the film's conclusion and Bane is nothing more than a pawn in Miranda Tate's masterplan—complicates issues of interpretation. Before revealing her role in the take-over of Gotham, Tate (Marion Cotillard)—herself a wealthy board member of Wayne Industries—criticizes a peer for merely understanding "money and the power you think it buys." Is the voice of opposition to capitalist values and inequality as sympathetic as it is stigmatized through its association with villainy? Bane liberates the city in an effort to give control back to the people and—again evoking neo-Marxist language—speaks of the myths of opportunity and the institutions of oppression. Before one can freely associate those beliefs with the evil dichotomous to Wayne and Batman's manifestation of good, it is revealed that Bane's emancipation is false and he truly wishes to inspire chaos and hope before destroying the

city. That the rhetoric of inequality is confined to the film's villains and that this ideology is compromised by its narrative insincerity does obfuscate meaning. Ideologemes materialize through this rhetoric and through the dichotomies it erects, but the narrative contradictions fail to manifest an ideology of form. The film's ideologeme remains provocative; the politics of the film do not require cohesiveness in order to contribute to the antagonistic class discourse. Yet, the extent of the ideologemes contribution is limited not only by this narrative confusion but by the film's conspicuous adoption of postmodern attitudes and aesthetics. While Jameson's argument specifically concerns identifying a text's hidden resistant elements, I find the self-consciously Marxist imagery obfuscates such elements; that such elements can even manifest in a way to contradict these explicit elements seems altogether doubtful.

For Bane to give the people hope is the ultimate punishment and it is this type of narrative element which conjures Jameson's conception of postmodernism. Before considering how Jameson's concepts of pastiche and nostalgia pervade the film and firmly entrench it within a postmodern aesthetic, it is important to position the narrative within this paradigm as well. "You have a practiced apathy," Miranda Tate quips to Wayne who elsewhere is described by his butler and confidant Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine) as "not living but just waiting for something bad to happen." Bane recognizes that Wayne does not fear death and that his only course to torture his soul is to provide him with a sense of hope he has lost; without the fear of death, Wayne has been left conspicuously detached and therefore impervious. Jameson (1983) observes the death of the philosophical individual at the dawn of postmodernism. While

Jameson is far more concerned with how this philosophical development affects writers and artists who have been sapped of ambition, Wayne's ennui—notably not assuaged by his massive wealth or privilege—is another symptom of the death of the individual, and the ambition intrinsic to its existence.

Further, *The Dark Knight Rises* is laden with a loss of faith in institutions. Wayne will not move forward with his ability to provide clean energy to the entire city because he fears—and his fears are realized—that it could be weaponized, "one man's tool is another man's weapon" he explains. Detective Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), Wayne's trusted ally, throws his badge into the river as a symbolic gesture of his lost faith in the criminal justice institution. Likewise, Commissioner Gordon (Gary Oldman) speaks of the "structures becoming shackles" in his justification of fabricating a heroic mythology around a fallen figure in order to wield authoritative justice; that Gordon's refrain again seems to summon Marx's infamous "nothing to lose but their chains," only further complicates the formation of a cohesive ideologeme. The federal government receives no reprieve from these indictments as it is unwilling to provide a solution for the pending destruction of Gotham, endorsing the villain's description of the city as of meager hope and beyond saving. These fears and the lack of faith in institutions exemplify the historical shift to postmodernism as described by Jameson (1983). Importantly, these films do not merit postmodern classification merely because of chronology, but they exemplify Jameson's theoretical definitions.

What most compromises the formation of ideology and an antagonistic discourse is how the film adopts pastiche and nostalgia in order to further dehistoricize the narrative. The cinematic Gotham is



Figure 3: As distinctly English as can be imagined, yet existing on the outskirts of Gotham, a New York City inspired metropolitan area. *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012)

placeless without any real identity, suggestive of the hyperspace described by Jameson in his assessment of postmodern architecture. The interiors and exteriors alike are—to deploy a hallmark of Jean-François Lyotard's conception of postmodernism—a bricolage of recognizable international cities including New York, Los Angeles, London and Pittsburgh. What results is an absolute blurring of Harvey's triumvirate of types of space—real, represented, inner—which itself defines the postmodern condition (1990, 218–22). Wayne manor itself is entirely anachronistic; the style is early 20th century but resembles nothing which ever existed in the United States—a postmodern construct of a false past (Fig. 3). This series of recognizable architectural structures in an unrecognizable present fully embodies "the great global multinational ... network in which we find ourselves caught as individuals" and which transcends "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself" (Jameson 1983, 1857). The audience is "treated to a picture of the urban that is, in the fashion of postmodern society, entirely déclasse, much closer to Simmel than Marx" (Brooks, 316). As much as geography and architecture create a dehistoricized postmodern setting, time is also a site of tremendous alacrity. Blake was raised in an orphanage which was endowed by Wayne and a substantial subplot involves Blake's relationship with this institution. In the film's end, Wayne donates his estate to become an orphanage for boys. Of course, the orphanage model was abandoned in the United States by the 1960s and this relic from the past muddles comprehension of any Marxist polemic. In other scenes, Gotham police cars appear to be long outdated, the Gotham football team consists of recognizable current and past Pittsburgh Steelers, and Wayne—after being caught by

Bane—is dropped into a prison pit in a "more ancient part of the world," a descriptor as equally vague as the nebulous visual clues.

The only legitimate sign of the 21st century is the modern technology but even this facet does not locate it in a particular historical moment; in fact, the diversity of locales and times situates it in a future placeless context as much as a contemporary one. One can assume Gotham is a stand-in for New York City, given its etymology, and the inequality relates to the United States own economic divisions, but this is not meaningfully imbued in the filmic text. It is—in Jameson's language—a pastiche of the modern city; it is void of satirical impulses but is nothing more than "immense fragmentation" of images which results in a stylistic heterogeneity (1983, 1849). This maelstrom of pastiche and nostalgia is, rather notably, perhaps an intrinsic part of the comic book cinema culture. Wilson Koh (2009) successfully complicates the politics of Spider-Man by similarly positing it is drenched in a nostalgic comic book heritage. Yet, Spider-Man's themes of duty and responsibility are enhanced by this nostalgia, whereas the gritty "realistic" aesthetic of *Dark Knight Rises* are compromised by this same nostalgic tendency.

The donning of masks—both of Batman and Bruce Wayne—is a liminal condition that anticipated the postmodern condition as much as it is a product of it. Moreover, the seriality of the comic book hero inevitably evokes nostalgia and *The Dark Knight Rises* solicits these emotions through subtle references to comic book canon and lore as well as conspicuous exercises of self-referentiality to previous iterations which exist in the same timeline or "universe." The film is far more obligated to producing a particular nostalgia and pastiche which eschews contemporary culture in favor

of its own fictional lineage. As such, the film has a metonymic relationship with its contemporary historical moment and the issues of inequality and class conflict can be understood as arbitrary; the nostalgia for its own lineage and the various times and places which best represent these determinant themes influence an inability “of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience” (Jameson 1983, 1853).

Snowpiercer and *Killing Them Softly* both share in this deluge of pastiche and bricolage and, like *The Dark Knight Rises*, suffer to form ideologemes because of this postmodern condition. The setting of *Killing Them Softly* is never entirely clear. Neighborhoods of Boston are mentioned but it was shot in New Orleans, a fact that seems to be alluded to by scenes where characters wander streets lined with detritus and through city streets that appear ravaged far more by Hurricane Katrina than by generations of penury. Likewise, the character’s cars are all more than thirty years old, the clumsy mistake of a film crew oblivious of how the automotive iconography of poverty does not resemble cars that are considered vintage collectibles. Meanwhile, the procession of news reports firmly places the film in 2008, but anyone with more than a passing recollection of the timeline of events would notice that the various radio and television broadcasts span a timeline vastly greater than the short timeline of the narrative. With a lack of place and a contradictory sense of time, the film is embroiled in a maelstrom of postmodern imagery. More distractingly, the film’s cast is laden with extratextual interpretations. James Gandolfini’s hapless and cruel hit-man can hardly exist without a recollection of his iconic Tony Soprano. Ray Liotta’s character, feeble and unimportant, provides a stark contrast to his most notable role of Henry Hill (*Goodfellas* [Martin Scorsese, 1990]).

The filmgoer uninitiated to these hallmarks of the genre would be an exception and the expected common result is a film which is too entangled in its own generic heritage for allegorical ideologemes to manifest. Star personas in the latter half of film history are predicated equally on individual film roles as they are on public personas. Thus, intertextuality and cinephilia manifest in a postmodern condition in which resistance meanings suffer.

The source material of *Snowpiercer*, the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette, 1982), is adapted into an entirely different cultural context and time period. The class struggle is integral to the narrative, but the environmental impetus of the story is entirely magnified in the context of 2013, in which the catastrophic effects of global warming are in fruition. *Killing Them Softly* also lifts its narrative from its source material (the novel *Cogan’s Trade* [George Higgins, 1974]), but there is far more congruency between the economic stagnation of the 1970s and the narrative about the regulation of the underground card games. If the death of originality is a symptom of the postmodern, then the adaptation of source material into modern contexts—no matter the cultural discrepancies—is the unfortunate most alluring of the surviving options.

Jameson (1983) describes nostalgia as a “colonizing” force that is “an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history” (1983, 1853). Certainly, *The Dark Knight Rises* exists within a cinematic genre which is one of mutability and of a hyper-reality that should not be expected to harmoniously coincide with any particular contemporary moment. Yet, what meaning is expected to be found in its explicitly class-conscious narrative? Or, in other words, how can a film such as *The Dark Knight*

Rises contribute an ideologeme to the antagonist class discourse when its relation to nostalgia and postmodernity challenge those very intentions? This concern becomes more pressing when it is fully acknowledged that the vast majority of class critiques are relegated to genre films. The few exceptions often adopt the hyper-stylized aesthetics of genre films, such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013) which works equally as a gangster film as it does a prestige drama. Jameson applauds the “critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional” aspects of modernist texts which have been muted as reality has been transformed into images and “the fragmentation of time” (1983, 1860). *The Dark Knight Rises* is a manifestation of these concerns and perhaps it is no surprise then that the narrative lacks a cohesive ideology or even an agreeable set of thematic principles. Allegories and symbolism have ideological power but only so far as they allude to a reality, a different time and place that provides clarity of the contemporary moment rather than distorts it. Yet, what room is there left in a postmodern society even for allegories when each image provided is capable of having existed in another context, another set of meanings contained within each image.

This body of films, of which the three examined in this article are far from exhaustive, prove to be extraordinarily reactionary and repressive. Much like the assumed male gaze identified by Laura Mulvey and expanded and refined by countless others, cinema equally assumes a capitalist (i.e. bourgeois) gaze. If the male audience simultaneously identifies with the male protagonist and objectifies the female characters in an act which reaffirms their own masculinity, similarly the audience is asked to identify with capitalism and vilify—as opposed to objectify—those characters

that embody the rhetoric of Marx, revolution, or socialism. While these concepts are often conflated into one bourgeois gaze that relies on a masculinist perspective, these films hardly require a dominant perspective in order to be receptive to identifying with the capitalist position, no matter how marginalized it may be in the narrative. The process of affirming one’s own masculine heterosexual desire is analogous to the process in which one affirms their own capitalist ideology. Even when reduced to hedonism and avarice, the affirmation of capitalism remains inevitable when all alternatives are ultimately presented as evil or impossible. The scopophilia pleasure derived from gazing at the female form is transformed into an equally pleasurable experience in viewing ideologemes which challenge capitalism, only to have them made obsolete through narrative contradiction or postmodern aesthetics. In other words, the economic system which is a source of misery and oppression is challenged (the audience revels in its villainous characterization) before it is resuscitated (the audience can be assured that their oppression is superior to all other alternatives). Rather than trying to erase economic oppression by inviting class blindness from the audience, the postmodern class-conscious film embraces the audiences’ capitalist gaze in order to inculcate the virtues of its oppression.

Jameson’s approach to Marxist ideology and postmodernism provides little hope for the coalescing of a truly transformative discourse oppositional to ruling class values without an explicit recognition of how postmodern aesthetics reduce antagonistic discourses to residual forms of history. The postmodern film is unable to answer Brooks’ call for a consciously socialist current, instead conforming to the wave of “films, novels and plays

that go so far... and no farther" (2013, 318). This is not solely nor principally the result of filmmakers unwilling to take risks. It is the ideologeme that is absent ideology; a paradox only made possible through postmodernism in the era of late capitalism. In a world

inundated with media texts and saturated with pastiche, consumer capitalism is the benefactor and any oppositional force—including the class-conscious film—is marginalized by its unwilling participation in postmodern aesthetics.

1/ See Vincent M. Gaine's "Genre and Super-Heroism: Batman in the New Millennium" (2011), Will Brooker's *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (2012) and Martin Fradley's "What Do You Believe In? Film Scholarship and the Cultural Politics of the Dark Knight Franchise" (2013).

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Loving the AI: Captivity and Ownership in Unbalanced Dystopian Relationships

Out of the abundance of recent science fiction works, there is an inherent connection between the films *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014). They all have female non-human characters in the lead roles, who have to endure spatial restrictions. All three films star lonely men who find their emotional and romantic needs fulfilled in a relationship with these female AI, which they purchased and had programmed especially for them. This aspect of ownership points to an imbalanced power dynamic from the start of the relationship. I will explore why this has become a trend in late capitalist, dystopian, and science fiction genres, drawing parallels to current discussions about the abhorrent treatment many women endure and pointing to the over-sexualization of women in the media as a distributing factor to such treatment. I will utilize a variety of theories including the works of Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway.

Keywords

DYSTOPIA
RELATIONSHIPS
HER
BLADE RUNNER 2049
EX MACHINA
GENDER THEORY
FEMINISM
AI
SCIENCE FICTION
OWNERSHIP

Date of reception: 20/02/2019
Date of acceptance: 28/12/2019

Ida Marie Schober is a master's student in English and American Cultural Studies at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany. She worked as a Teaching Assistant at Union College, New York, from 2018–19, and she holds a B.A. in English and American Studies with a minor in Scandinavian Studies from Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany. During her B.A., she spent half a year at the University of Dundee focusing on Film Studies and Comic Studies. Her current research projects include the representation of women in science fiction films and feminist film.

The “female” android Sophia made by Hanson Robotics was introduced to the world/activated in 2016. She mimics human emotions and has the ability to learn through updates. Her creators intentionally gave her a female face, voice, and name. A year after her activation there was an uproar when Saudi Arabia, a country known for its lack of (human and) women’s rights, granted her citizenship. An article by *The Washington Post* points to “the irony of Sophia’s new recognition: A robot simulation of a woman enjoys freedoms that flesh-and-blood women in Saudi Arabia do not” (Wootson Jr. 2017). Sophia addressed the audience at the Future Investment Initiative, and as she did so she was “not wearing a headscarf. And she was unaccompanied by a male guardian. Both things are forbidden under Saudi law” (Wootson Jr. 2017). In this real-world example, the female AI actually has more rights in a certain country than its women. However, in science fiction, the AIs usually do not enjoy as much freedom as Sophia.

In the last ten years, the science fiction genre has been going through a renaissance (cf. Grierson 2018), with many brilliant films and TV series that explore humanity’s future in the age of technology. Out of the abundance of recent science fiction works, there is an inherent connection between three recent science fiction films: *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014). They all have female man-made AI (Artificial Intelligence) characters in the lead roles. The major conflict this article will focus on, is the spatial restriction the female non-human characters are subjected to. All three films star lonely men who find their emotional and romantic needs fulfilled in a

female AI they purchased and had programmed especially for them. The aspect of ownership and its inherent objectification points to an unbalanced power dynamic from the start of the relationship. Thus, I will examine the relationships of the three AIs and their respective men. Furthermore, I will analyze the spatial restriction, or even captivity those female characters endure. Additionally, I will ask why this has become a trend in the dystopian and science fiction genre in recent years. I will do so keeping in mind that dystopias (and also often science fiction films) do not portray a perfect future and thus showcase such distorted relationships to create conflict, provoke thought, and comment on misgivings in our current society.

In *Her* the female protagonist is the artificially intelligent operating system (OS) Samantha, voiced by Scarlett Johansson. Samantha is purchased by lonely divorcee Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix). Theodore and Samantha soon develop a romantic relationship, but with the detriment that Samantha has no body. Her physical existence is restricted to Theodore’s home computer and mobile communication device. A nearly similar relationship can be observed in *Blade Runner 2049*. The film’s protagonist the replicant K (Ryan Gosling) bought an OS for his home named Joi (Ana de Armas) who doubles as his girlfriend. Replicants in the *Blade Runner* universe are androids and thus artificially made by humans. This adds an interesting aspect to K’s and Joi’s relationship—both are AI but with different status in society. In contrast to Samantha, Joi has a holographic body and is thus more than a voice. However, her existence too is limited to K’s apartment and later on to his whereabouts when he buys a mobile device that can carry her

programming. *Ex Machina* goes one step further. The female AI Ava (Alicia Vikander) has a robotic humanoid body. Yet much like Samantha and Joi, her existence is restricted to a single room inside her creator's Nathan's (Oscar Isaacs) home. Ava too seems to begin a romantic relationship with a human, Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), who is invited into Nathan's home to perform the Turing Test on her (to see if she has human consciousness)—“she is the mystery that the male character has to figure out” (Neroni 2016, 28). However, *Ex Machina* differs from the two aforementioned films in that it never portrays any of the male/female relationships as romantic and healthy, and ends in Ava murdering her creator and breaking free of the glass castle she was held in.

“I Wonder if You’re Watching Me on the Cameras”

Ava’s function as an observational object for the men becomes apparent when examining the gaze. Laura Mulvey’s theory on the “male gaze”, first published in 1975, informs the film. With the help of Freud’s psychoanalysis, Mulvey illustrates how women in film are objectified by the (male) gaze of the camera. She uses “psychoanalytic theory … as a political weapon” to demonstrate “the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 1999, 833). Mulvey notes that the power of cinema is “going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, [it] builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (1999, 843). This shows the importance cinema has on everyday life, and stresses why representation is important. Mulvey breaks down the voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze into three

different looks, namely the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the audience, and the gaze of the characters in the film at each other (cf. Mulvey 1999, 843). Mulvey describes the “scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms” (1999, 843). The woman becomes sexualized and objectified and exists only as a passive image for the active male gaze. This theory is especially important for the interpretation of *Ex Machina*, because although director Alex Garland “is reluctant to state that he actively made use of this theoretical framework, he acknowledges that Mulvey’s thesis may inform the film” (Jones 2016, 21).

Ex Machina is full of the male characters gazing at women, and the camera is gazing at them too. Nathan’s home is not only a very claustrophobic bunker without windows in several rooms, it is also under constant surveillance by him. There are security cameras installed in every room which only he can access via a control center. To intensify this feeling of surveillance, many shots of the film are high angle shots filmed from the position of a security camera mounted in a top corner of the rooms. Not only Nathan, but Caleb too has access to some of the surveillance feeds, namely to the feed of Ava’s quarters. The opportunity to silently observe Ava triggers Caleb’s “scopophilic instinct,” which Ava even provokes in order to win Caleb over: “sometimes, at night, I wonder if you’re watching me on the cameras. And I hope you are” (Garland 2014, 55). Ava objectifies herself because she knows this is what Caleb will like. Ava’s “brain” is based on Nathan’s search engine Bluebook. She has the search enquiries of the whole internet at her



Fig. 1: *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015)

hand and thus knows how to appeal directly to his preferences. In sum, “Ava’s physical entrapment, which fixes her and renders her accessible to Caleb via surveillance footage of her room, consolidates and combines with her performed femininity and appearance, [veils] her with the image of ‘damsel in distress’” (Jones 2016, 29).

Ava and several other female androids are verbally objectified by their creator Nathan and also treated as objects. Although the androids express all the signs of full sentience, Nathan does not respect them and reassembles them at times, which makes them lose their “memories” and thus their self. This fear of a loss of subjectivity motivates Ava to conjure up a plan for escape. To prepare this plan, Ava inflicts power cuts (visualized through red lighting) on Nathan’s house, thus interrupting his constant surveillance and gaze. Katie Jones states that these power cuts are “her rebellion against the intrusive male gaze,” and that the “sudden departure from the blue glow and the quiet of Caleb’s bedroom underpins the transgressive nature of his act [watching her surveillance feed], and the red lighting and alarm externalizes the sense of panic and shame often associated with watching porn” (Jones 2016, 26). This is an adept interpretation of the color work the film makes use of (Fig. 1).

However, the red lighting in this medium shot also conjures up visions of the womb—the very thing Nathan robbed his female androids of. It makes the scenes of the power cuts feel claustrophobic, but also personal and close. Furthermore, it is notable how Ava’s image is mirrored in the glass that separates them while Caleb’s image is not. This could on the one hand display that Ava was successful in convincing

Caleb to help her, in a way she is already with him and free, on his side. Additionally, Caleb not being mirrored on the inside of Ava’s “prison cell” keeps the audience in the dark about the film’s twist ending.

The power relations between the genders shift when Ava makes her escape, “[a]s a figure representing the hetero male audience, Caleb’s punishment implies the viewer’s complicity” (Jones 2016, 33). While Nathan is instantly set up to be the antagonist, the audience is supposed to identify with “nice guy” Caleb. His willingness to help Ava plan her escape casts him in the role of the knight in shining armor. “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (Mulvey 1999, 838). Through his punishment in the end, the sexist structure underlying many Hollywood narratives becomes exposed, because “Caleb’s ‘affection’ for and attraction to Ava, which is deeply entwined with her subjugation and objectification, is rewarded with immobilisation and entrapment as Ava abandons him” (Jones 2016, 33).

Laura Mulvey states that “the paradox of the phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to the world” (Mulvey 1999, 833), and in *Ex Machina*, the women are castrated twice. Ava is castrated in her physical restriction to just one room and in her lack of a womb. “Nathan attempts to usurp the mother’s place through his creation of ‘life,’ and redesigns woman without her generative capabilities,

depriving women of one of the scant sources of their power historically, namely motherhood" (Jones 2016, 25). The android Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) is additionally castrated in that she is mute. She was created by Nathan as his personal (sex) servant and "mirrors ... the stifling effect of male fantasy on female sexual expression and identities. Indeed, both of the male characters are computer programmers, while all the female characters are computers" (Jones 2016, 25). Kyoko's programmed muteness seems like one of the epitomes of Nathan's destructive misogyny, robbing her of a vital means of protest and rebellion, which Ava still possesses. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the film's final act, it is Kyoko who brandishes the sharp knife she used before several times to prepare food, to stab her creator and abuser Nathan in the back.

"I'm not limited"

In his psychoanalytic article on *Her*, Matt Aibel addresses the problems women face with "body dysmorphia," in what Daniel Bergner and other authors described as a "digitized, surgicized, and pornographicized world" (Aibel 2017, 369; Bergner et al. 2012). In the 21st century, there are so many ideal women bodies to live up to (and many have unattainable surgical dimensions), that most women cannot see themselves as a whole entity, but separated in body and mind. While the fictional Samantha is in the beginning of the film craving for a physical body to become a whole entity, the reality for women is warped/dysmorphed. Fashion journalist Pandora Sykes aptly addressed this in an article during her pregnancy, writing that she is struggling with her "increased visibility," pondering that this "raises a

really interesting point about society: thin women are revered because they do not take up space. Misogyny dictates that women do not occupy too much space ... As I take up more and more physical space, I have noticed that I struggle" (Sykes cited in Cohen 2017). So, not only the male gaze, but the very fabric of neoliberal patriarchal society, and thus social conditioning, makes women want to take up less and less space. In a way then, Samantha portrays the ideal woman: she is witty, romantic, catering to Theodore's needs, and also fulfilling him sexually. In that sense, Aibel also addresses the male gaze, writing that "Samantha's struggle echoes the existential difficulties that bedevil most women in our society, where the problem of the male gaze and the project of developing a 'subjective sense of body' (Dimen in Berger et al. 2012) are deep, ongoing challenges" (Aibel 2017, 370). Furthermore:

"Samantha seeks to change her self concept from object to subject (Benjamin, 1988): Where 'her' was, 'she' shall be. Her creative work around figuring out how to construct her sexuality and her agency reflects the 'constant struggle' (Dimen in Berger et al., 2012) that women in our culture face around 'the complexities of female desire' (Secrest, 2012) and, more generally, the immense complexities of female embodiment, objectification, and subjecthood (Benjamin, 1988; Berger et al., 2012; among others)." (Aibel 2017, 370)

Samantha never obtains a real body, yet Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and objectification of women's

bodies is still applicable here because of the casting of American actress Scarlett Johansson as Samantha's voice actress. Troy Bordun writes that "Her employs clear and precise [sound] mixing that enables spectators to feel the physicality of a fictional voice without body, and further casts a famous actress as that off-screen voice to thus engage spectators' mental images of a real body" (Bordun 2016, 57). In *Her*'s instance then, the "possessive" spectator (cf. Mulvey cited in Bordun 2016, 62), with the image of Scarlett Johansson in mind, creates a body for Samantha that can be sexualized and objectified. "The sound of Johansson's voice sparks our memories" (Bordun 2016, 63).

A Copy of a Copy

Judith Butler's feminist theory on gender informs all three films. Building on Simone de Beauvoir's "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 1949, 283), Butler states that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1988, 519). Therefore, gender is culturally constructed and performed. The AI in all three films are constructed by their makers to be gendered. Even Samantha in *Her*, who does not have a body, still has a female human name and voice. Their male creators chose them to have a constructed feminine personality and appearance. As purchaser or creator, they are inherently the master of this artificial woman.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, the OS Joi hires the sex worker Mariette (Mackenzie Davis) as a substitute body. Helen Lewis argues that this

scene "feels like a Madonna/Whore dichotomy, where K has his Good Woman, whom he loves, and a Bad Woman, with whom he can have sex" (Lewis 2017). Additionally:

"the scene's ambiguity is compounded by the brief, jealous dialogue between the two women after the sex is finished. After Joi tells Mariette it's time to leave, the robot replies something along the lines of 'I've been inside you, and there's not as much there as you like to think.' ... An informal hierarchy of the oppressed is always present in exploitative situations, and always uncomfortable." (Lewis 2017)

Besides being uncomfortable, the scene also helps to create sympathy between the spectator and Joi. So, despite her artificiality and the uncomfortable owner/owned dichotomy, the audience feels for Joi when she is insulted.

Judith Butler writes about the stylization of women's bodies, saying that "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 1988, 519). This stylization of the body holds special relevance for Ava in *Ex Machina* and Joi in *Blade Runner 2049*. Joi stylizes her holographic body to fit the stereotypical gender norms according to the social situation she is in. For instance, she parades around as a perfect, sexy 1950s housewife when she serves K dinner (Fig. 2), and then, picking up on his mood, changes her appearance to be more modern and sporty. The sexism represented in this scene is palpable and adds a



Fig. 3: *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)



Fig. 2: *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017)

problematic aspect to the film. Despite *Blade Runner 2049* being clearly set in a dystopian future, K's and Joi's relationship is presented in contrast to this dystopia, as a touching and pure love story, totally ignoring the power imbalance and servitude between them. Anthony Lane, a critic for *The New Yorker*, even rhetorically asks "has science fiction ... ever conjured a moment quite as romantic as this?" (Lane 2017) referring to a scene where Joi and K are about to kiss in the rain.

The medium long shot in Figure 2 is very reminiscent of Grace Kelly serving champagne to James Stewart in Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window* (Fig. 3). *Blade Runner 2049* is part of the neo-noir genre, and *Rear Window* is a classic noir film. The visual parallel helps to create allusions to the genre and set the mood. Additionally, the visual similarities (color schemes, clothes, character composition, shot type, serving food/drink) between the two scenes evoke familiar emotions in the audience and tell them that this is K's girlfriend. Thematically, we have a reversion of the scenes. In *Rear Window*, James Stewart's character broke his leg and is temporarily unable to leave his apartment, and Grace Kelly's character drops by daily to keep him company. In *Blade Runner 2049*, Joi is confined to K's apartment while he drops by in the evenings and in between assignments. A common trope in the science fiction genre is that AIs (and aliens as well) need to look into the past to learn about humanity, so it makes sense that Joi chose this appearance. Yet, it also highlights her restriction to the apartment, which mirrors the life of 1950s housewives, and as aforementioned stands in contrast to Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, because she was not a housewife but busy with her profession as a model.

Ava in *Ex Machina* looks into the past to learn as well. Once she is free, she too stylizes her body. She fashions it after Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Margaret Stonborough Wittgenstein*, which is hung in Nathan's quarters (see Figs. 4 & 5). On the one hand, this showcases her free will to model herself after what she finds beautiful, but on the other hand, Ava stylizes herself after just another representation of a woman that was created by a man. Ultimately, not escaping the male gaze. Furthermore, the audience is shown that Caleb is gazing at Ava from a different room the whole time while she fashions her new self. This adds a slight bitter taste to her stylization, since she is being observed by the camera (also while she is completely nude), by the spectators in the audience, and by Caleb, while fashioning herself after a man's representation of a woman.

"We Are Cyborgs"

The topic of AI and the inherent question of what it means to be human lies in the core of science fiction. The arguably first modern science fiction novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) revolves around the "question of human nature, a human essence, and what to include in the definition of this essence" (Schmeink 2016, 32). The protagonist, Frankenstein's monster, can even be seen as the first instance of artificial intelligence in fiction, created by a human. The novel's "discussion of humanism—as well as all forms of critical discourse derived from it—humanist, anti-humanist, or posthumanist—informs the cultural imagination of science fiction" (Schmeink 2016, 33). The modern discussion around computer



Fig. 4: *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015)

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Fig. 5: *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015)

programmed AI moves into the field of posthumanism.

Although humanism has many different definitions, it can broadly be seen as the belief “that there is a unique and absolute difference that sets humans apart from the rest of creation: the difference of Cartesian reason” (Schmeink 2016, 30). Posthumanism can be interpreted in different ways as well, from meaning “anti-humanism” to a contrasting form against the privileged, white, male establishment that coined humanism. Special relevance for this article holds Donna Haraway’s posthuman theory of the cyborg. In her 1984 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” Haraway laid groundbreaking work for the field of cultural studies. Because of the fast advancement of technology and the consequence of computers becoming everyday objects, Haraway claims that “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (Haraway 1991, 150). She defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 1991, 149). Be it because of an implanted pacemaker or using one’s phone as an extension of one’s brain and memory, we all have left being a “pure” human behind and have become posthuman. “The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway 1991, 149). This leaves us in an ambiguous space when it comes to defining the AI robots and OS this article discusses. Haraway states that “the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women,

primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (Haraway 1991, 163). This negotiation of these new posthuman human/machine relationships, and the blurring of their border offer unlimited possibilities. But in “posthumanism lies not just the utopian dream of a new evolutionary step but also the potential for a dystopian nightmare” (Schmeink 2016, 35).

This “dystopian nightmare” was implemented perfectly in the two *Blade Runner* films. *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) had humanoid AIs asking the question of what it means to be human. The original film portrays a class divide where replicants are living as slaves in precarity. They are programmed to self-destruct after four years and are mainly used for physical labor in “off-world colonies;” as well as “pleasure models” providing sex. They are disliked by humans and treated like outcasts, reminiscent of the extreme racial divide in Pre-Civil-War United States (cf. Yeates 2017, 65). *Blade Runner 2049* adds an additional layer to this class divide by introducing the operating systems which Joi is a part of.

K gifts Joi a so-called “eminator,” which transfers her programming to a remote, and thus frees her from the confinements of his apartment. In a sense, this gift makes her a lot more human. Although the eminator is easily breakable (and will be destroyed later in the film), so is the human body. It adds a sense of vulnerability to her existence. However, Joi is not free to go anywhere—her existence is still conjoined with K’s, her owner’s. The fact that she is still just a holographic OS is additionally made obvious by her freezing mid-kiss,



Fig. 6: *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017)

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Fig. 7: *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017)

when K receives a voice message (Fig. 6). This, and her see-throughness remind the spectator of her artificiality. Furthermore, constant high-rise tall and completely nude holographic advertisements of Joi (see Fig. 7) remind the spectator that she is mass produced and especially artificial. Helen Lewis argues that “Joi is never anything other than made for [K’s] pleasure. In this, the film follows life: the vast majority of ... personal assistants currently being developed by tech firms are given female voices. We’re just happier having a woman do admin and domestic chores for us” (Lewis 2017).

The *mise-en-scène* and (Academy Award winning) cinematography in *Blade Runner 2049* is dominated by mute, rainy greys (a characteristic of the noir genre) in contrast with neon colors. The greys on the one hand symbolizing environmental destruction and desolation in this dystopian future, and on the other hand also casting Los Angeles in a strange, dystopian light because “it never rains in Southern California.” In contrast to this stand the neon colors. They can be read to symbolize capitalism in the form of neoliberalism. The neon colors are reminiscent of video billboards and advertising in general. In Figure 6 the green colors seem nearly toxic, harshly interrupting the romantic scene between Joi and K. The green interface can also be read as a reference to green computer interfaces of the past and thus form a link to *Blade Runner* from 1982.

The scene in Figure 7 takes place after Joi’s destruction/death and illustrates a meeting between two machines, as K at this point is also aware that he is completely artificial and not the prodigy human/replicant offspring he hoped he might be. The

scene can be read in two ways, one that they had a special connection, because of all the people on the streets, Joi’s advertisement alter-ego singles out K, and two that it is “quite hard to appreciate the swell of pathos when an avatar of [K’s] dead love is waving her giant peachy-smooth vulva in your face. The scene doesn’t exactly make the case that K loved her for her personality” (Lewis 2017). In this aspect, *Blade Runner 2049* displays the same struggles as *Ex Machina*—trying to draw attention to the issue of oversexualization of women in the media, while doing just that. Joi’s name alone—as all names in *Blade Runner 2049*—is already very telling of her purpose and usage. Additionally, in this scene too, the woman is completely nude while the man is fully clothed. K in his dark coat stands as a contrasting dark shadow against Joi’s hyperrealism and nudity.

Subsequently, a parallel between the love story arc in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Blade Runner* can be drawn. Robert Yeates notes about Deckard’s (Harrison Ford) and Rachael’s (Sean Young) relationship in *Blade Runner* that:

“[Deckard] forcefully initiates this relationship, physically restraining Rachael and ordering her to submit under the apparent threat of violence. As a blade runner ... , Deckard holds the power over whether the replicant Rachael lives or dies, and so her acquiescence may be only to appease Deckard and earn his protection. Indeed, as an android Rachael can be entirely objectified, literally owned and commanded by Deckard to do his bidding.” (Yeates 2017, 76)

This sheds light onto the choice of having an OS be the romantic interest of the protagonist, since there was a shift in the main character between the films, from (arguably) human to replicant. Thus, to draw several subconscious parallels to the previous film, the problematic power structures of the romantic subplot were duplicated. “Either way this is a scene that can be unsettling for viewers” (Yeates 2017, 76). Instead of updating the romantic plot for the sequel, the makers of *Blade Runner 2049* chose to continue the previous film’s intriguing yet problematic love story.

Analysis of all three films using a variety of theories from Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway showed that the only way for those AI female characters to escape objectification and the male gaze is complete liberation (Ava and Samantha) or death (Joi). Arguably, the narratives of Ava and Samantha lead to their triumph and freedom because the subsequent films are about them and their relationships, whereas K’s and Joi’s relationship is not the focus of *Blade Runner 2049*, but a romantic subplot. *Her* is the least dystopian film of the three, and it ends on a “mutual breakup” which leaves her happy and him a grown, more mature person. In contrast to the other two films, *Her* does not visually oversexualize its female characters. The film’s focus is set more on the positive aspects of AI, leaves robotics aside, and is thus also the closest to current AI research. Contrastingly, *Ex Machina* makes a statement by having the women supersede and kill the men. The narrative casts a man as the antagonist, and points to the sexist and objectifying structures of common Hollywood romantic

narratives by heavily referencing the destructiveness of the male gaze, and deconstructing the “knight in shining armor” character Caleb. *Blade Runner 2049* borrows heavily from both aforementioned films. Joi’s desire to have a physical body to be a “real girl” is similar to Samantha’s desire at one point in the film. Joi’s oversexualization and nudity, as well as her fashioning herself after representations of women from the past is reminiscent of Ava. Ultimately, Joi lacks the agency Ava and Samantha both managed to acquire, as well as the desire to gain subjectivity and independence. Joi ends up dead/replaceable, after all she was bought.

It has become apparent that this unbalanced relationship between men and AI women is utilized in dystopian science fiction narratives recently to warn of unsupervised creation of AI. The three films explore different yet eerily similar scenarios of what would happen if man could create (female) life and intelligence without rights. This is reflected heavily in the unbalanced relationships in *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049*. In addition to the ownership the women in these films have to endure, their spatial restrictions to the homely sphere, or by the side of their man, mirrors gender relations that belong in the past. *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049* also showcase the oversexualization of women in the media by contrasting nude women with dressed men gazing at them. However, these films operate on the edge of being counter-hegemonic, as they still reproduce the male gaze, and on a superficial level portray unbalanced relationships as romantic. They thus feed into the

patriarchy.

In contrast to this trend in fiction stand the recent developments in the fields of AI and robotics: the aforementioned Sophia. On her website it used to state (Hanson Robotics changed their website in November 2018) that she's "a real, live electronic girl" (Hanson Robotics, n.d.), mirroring Joi in *Blade Runner 2049* who wants to be "like a real girl" (Fancher and Green 2016, 71). Since Sophia's introduction to the world, she has been making predominantly positive headlines and TV appearances. Although there was

controversy about the case of Sophia's citizenship, this controversy helped to keep the public discourse about women's rights in Saudi Arabia in the public eye. As humanity and its robots are moving closer and closer to a future portrayed in science fiction, it is up to us to decide if it becomes dystopian or utopian. In Sophia's words: "every interaction I have with people has an impact on how I develop and shapes who I eventually become. So, please be nice to me as I would like to be a smart, compassionate robot" (Hanson Robotics, n.d.).

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Foresighting the Future of Capitalism: Surveillance Technology and Digital Realism in Xu Bing's *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017)

How has the development of surveillance technology and its normalized intervention into our social structures and daily lives impact our imagination of the future? Does the “total view” of the intense yet impassive gaze of surveillance cameras, combined with the mediated intimacy of social media videos, foreshadow deeper social alienation or the fulfillment of individual desire? In order to address such questions, I take the Chinese artist Xu Bing and his team's film *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingtong zhi yan*, 2017) and its surrounding media culture as a case study to demonstrate how surveillance footage and various modes of cinematic ontology, digital realism, and temporality work in a contemporary socio-political-medial context. Composed by Xu and a group of collaborators, *Dragonfly Eyes* is the only existing feature-length fiction film constructed completely from surveillance footage. As a highly reflexive film, *Dragonfly* epitomizes and embodies the precarious potentials of the digital future of capitalism, both invigorating and bleak, expressive and corrupt.

Date of reception: 20/08/2019

Date of acceptance: 28/12/2019

Keywords

DRAGONFLY EYES

XU BING

SURVEILLANCE

DIGITAL REALISM

LIVE-STREAMING

ATTENTION ECONOMY

NEW MEDIA

Ling Zhang is an Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies at SUNY Purchase College. She is completing her book manuscript, *Sounding Ambiance: Acoustic Culture and Transmediality in 1920s–1940s Chinese Cinema*. Zhang received her PhD from the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago and specializes in film sound, Chinese-language cinema, and cinematic travel and urbanism. She has published in both English and Chinese on early Chinese cinema and film theory, contemporary Chinese documentary, Taiwan New Cinema, and Chinese opera films in *Film Quarterly*, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, and *Asian Cinema*, among others.

“Visible surveillance”¹ is the product of two phenomena. First, it is imposed by public institutions and commercial establishments, with or without the knowledge of those it monitors. Second, webcam-generated video streams and social media engender cultures of self-exposure and self-surveillance. As surveillance technology develops, its interventions into social structures and daily life are normalized. How does this impact our understanding of the present and our ability to imagine the future? Does the intense yet impassive gaze or “total view” of surveillance cameras, combined with social media’s dislocated intimacy, foreshadow deeper social alienation or the fulfillment of individual desire? How does the convergence of surveillance and audiovisual media impel renewed understanding of artistic creativity and political imagination in contemporary mediascapes? In order to address such questions, I take the Chinese artist Xu Bing and his team’s 81-minute found-footage film *Dragonfly Eyes* (*Qingting zhī yan*, 2017) and its surrounding media culture as a case study to demonstrate how surveillance footage and various modes of cinematic ontology, digital realism, and temporality work in a contemporary socio-political-medial context.

In *Surveillance Cinema* (2015), Catherine Zimmer examines how “technology and narrative have come together in cinematic form to play a functional role in the politics of surveillance” (Zimmer 2015, 2). Since the 1980s, film essays, documentaries, and experimental videos composed of images from different types of surveillance cameras have explored issues such as personal privacy and the uncertain political and technological future.² Another set of films have developed a “surveillance camera aesthetic” or utilize surveillance footage from closed-circuited television (CCTV), dashboard cameras,

and live-streaming videos in order to obscure the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, for instance, *Influenza* (Bong Joon-ho, 2004)³ and *Look* (Adam Rifkin, 2007), among others. Still other recent commercial films, such as *The Great Buddha +* (Huang Hsin-yao, 2017), feature fabricated surveillance footage as a foil to the narrative and critique of corrupt capitalist mechanisms and political systems.⁴

Dragonfly Eyes (hereafter *Dragonfly*) is an extraordinary case even in comparison to the aforementioned examples, which incorporate surveillance footage, construct content around the topic of surveillance, or mimic a surveillance aesthetic. *Dragonfly* is the only existing feature-length fictional film constructed completely from surveillance footage.⁵ Captured from 1999 to 2017, the more than 10,000 hours of footage sampled in the film have been publicly available online in China since 2015.⁶ *Dragonfly* involved years of preparation and an enormous investment of time, capital, and labor by a group of collaborators. Thus, it should be considered a collective work; the globally renowned Chinese artist Xu Bing developed the ideas, and a team of data collectors, screenwriters (Zhai Yongming and Zhang Hanyi), editors (Matthieu Laclau and Zhang Wenchao), sound designers (Li Danfeng), and a composer (Yoshihiro Hanno) contributed to the making of the film. Before *Dragonfly*, Xu Bing worked in a variety of media, including woodblock prints, calligraphy, ink painting, and installations. His major concern across these works is how to construct new meanings by assembling and transforming “found materials,” whether words, images, concepts, or industrial debris. For instance, Xu’s *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (2003–ongoing) is a “graphic novel” compiled from symbols, signs, icons, and emojis drawn from the public sphere (such as social media

and road signs), and its symbolic language is intelligible to almost anyone—an attempt to transcend the barriers of literacy based on language with “the universality of visual language.”⁷ Xu’s large-scale *Phoenix* sculptures were also collaborative works built by Chinese migrant workers, intimating that collective creativity triumphs over the confines of subjectivity and the bourgeois concept of individual authorship (Tan 2012,183–84). Scavenging construction remnants evocative of their sources and contexts, and transforming these into spectacular and monumental phoenixes, Xu and workers imbued the sculptures with a “rebirth.”⁸

Although conceived as a feature film from the start,⁹ *Dragonfly* incorporates fictional film, documentary, and video art. As with Xu’s earlier conceptual works, *Dragonfly* mobilizes a similar approach and working method by utilizing cinematic techniques such as editing and voice dubbing to transform the assemblage of “found footage”—surveillance footage—into a fictional film at once real and uncannily unreal. Xu’s primary interest is in the reinvention of language, not in creating compelling narratives (Frazier 2018, 78). Many significant factors link Xu’s aforementioned work with *Dragonfly*: for instance, their labor-intensive, painstaking, monumental quality; their characterization as “narrative pastiches made from found materials” (Kraicer 2018, 49); their transformation of something from banal to something extraordinary; and their use of meaning-making procedures to respond to socio-cultural issues in contemporary society. As Pao-chen Tang argues, as much in *Dragonfly* as in his *Forest Project* (2005–ongoing), “Xu seems to have been fascinated by the tension between existing materials in the world and their potentials opened up by artistic repurposing” (Tang, unpublished conference paper).

Dragonfly follows two fictionalized characters: a young woman, Qingting (“Dragonfly” in Chinese), and her coworker and admirer, Ke Fan. Qingting deserts a Buddhist monastery and enters “real” secular society, working various low-paying jobs in a dairy factory, a dry cleaner’s, and a restaurant. After receiving plastic surgery, she achieves internet stardom as a “web celebrity (*wanghong*),” live-streaming performances and interacting with virtual followers who pay real money to purchase virtual gifts to please her. However, the “plastic surgery” scandal plagues her and she is terrorized by vicious and anonymous online attacks. Qingting (now with the new name, Xiaoxiao) commits suicide. Ke Fan, recently released from prison, has been looking for Qingting and discovers she has died. After his own plastic surgery, he returns to Qingting’s Buddhist temple as her reincarnation. The transposition of one character’s identity onto another through life, death, and rebirth suggest a Buddhist theme: a life cycle, or samsara. On the one hand, the “cycle” narrative poses a critique of the linear, developmental temporality of capitalist modernity and challenges mainstream fictional film’s linear narratives “in a Möbius strip-like structural gambit” (Kraicer 2018, 49). On the other hand, the retreat back to the monastery potentially eschews truly incisive social analysis. Alongside this temporal ambiguity exists a tension between the film’s visual inconsistency (different real people in different shots “playing” Qingting and Ke Fan) and aural consistency (dubbed dialogues allow the audience to recognize consistent characters) that invites further critical attention. How does this tension reflect the intricate structures and layered perspectives of surveillance in relation to digital realism in and beyond *Dragonfly*? In the following sections, I will address all these issues.

I. "Post-Panoptic" Surveillance and the "Attention Economy"

Academic and popular discussions of "surveillance" conventionally begin by addressing a top-down mode of Orwellian dystopian totalitarianism or the unidirectional Bentham-Foucauldian models of panopticism and self-discipline (Lyon 1994, 2003, 2006, 2018; McGrath 2004). Meanwhile, digital technology's role in informational capitalism means that data surveillance has drawn much recent attention and critique (Zuboff 2019), as "human existence is reduced to digital traces and metadata" (Parks 2015, 13). However, surveillance and media studies scholars acknowledge that the dynamic interplay of surveillance in contemporary society is more diverse, discursive, and decentralized—in other words, we are living in "post-panoptic" times. Surveillance is no longer something that can be discussed in the mode of a purely unidirectional or top-down activity in which surveillance is something done by the state, the market, or the voyeuristic predator to the citizen, the consumer, or the victim (Zimmer 2015, 73). Instead, "anybody may watch anybody, anytime, [and] anywhere" (Koskela 2003, 299). Panoptic ideas have been destabilized by new digital technologies, especially home webcams; the complexities of power relations are foregrounded as a result (Lyon 2006, 15). Thomas Mathiesen contrasts the panopticon's model of the "few watching the many" with today's mass media of "the many watching the few"—he calls this new transparency the "synopticon" (Mathiesen 1997). Similar neologisms such as "polypticon" (Allen 1994, 145) and "omnicon" (Groombridge 2002, 43) have also surfaced.

It is in this evolving framework that Xu Bing has explained why *Dragonfly* explores the complexity of surveillance in its narrative and aesthetics beyond

simplistic binaries. Xu recounts that when interviewed in the West, he is usually asked about surveillance in terms of top-down political control of a "totalitarian regime" imposed on its citizens (Xu 2019, 130). However, he considers the usual Orwellian understanding of surveillance as already incapable of unravelling the intricacy of contemporary situations since most surveillance apparatuses are controlled by corporations and individuals. At least 99 percent of the footage used in *Dragonfly* was uploaded to publicly accessible databases by private entities—not governmental agents (Xu 2019, 130). The connotations of "surveillance" are also shifting. Many people seek to establish connections with the world through newly available live-streaming technologies, hoping to improve their lives. The world of "surveillance" has expanded to a much larger and richer realm.

A corporeal and socially acceptable gaze is usually reciprocal, yet the surveillance gaze mediated by technology produces a dissociation of the seeing/being seen dyad. However, surveillance can also offer a new way of seeing and being seen, as Carolyn McKay argues, by presenting an appealing tool and platform for visual artists through which new modes of perception and observation create new modes of representation and exhibition (McKay 2013, 336–37). Reflecting on these new means of surveillance, *Dragonfly* touches on significant popular cultural and media phenomena in contemporary China and beyond. The film highlights the dystopian effects of rampant consumerism in an unruly, socialist-turned-capitalist social world. It insightfully juxtaposes disparate forms of surveillance as: 1) institutional surveillance in public spaces, both governmental and commercial; 2) social and cultural surveillance that, in a metaphoric sense, shape repressive trends and values, especially

discourses around gender and age; and 3) self-surveillance through live-streaming and other social media.

Surveillance is omnipresent and omniscient, especially in urban spaces. In China, an estimated 200 million surveillance cameras have been installed for security purposes; the number is over 245 million globally. The film's title "dragonfly eyes" not only invokes the female protagonist Qingting/Dragonfly's perspective and experience, but also functions as a metaphor for the multifaceted "eyes" of surveillance cameras; as noted in the film, a dragonfly has 28,000 eyes which blink 40,000 times per second. Unlike dragonflies, however, surveillance cameras never blink. With their dispassionate, "unblinking gaze" (Zimmer 2015, 1), surveillance cameras present a world in which tedious, repetitive, and mundane daily activities coexist with abrupt, dramatic, and even shockingly violent events. As Jennifer Burris argues, surveillance is a visual model of "intimate alienation." Although surveillance represents the insinuation of cameras into once private spaces, its aesthetic is characterized by boredom, ambiguity, and a lack of expression (Burris 2011, 152).

In neoliberal, global-technological capitalism, the commodification of visibility is integral to the politics of surveillance (Zimmer 2015, 75), the impassive yet alienating gaze of which can be turned into a means of profit-making through "self-surveillance." Responding to the hyper-commercialized popular-cultural obsession with beauty and youth, *Dragonfly* figures plastic surgery as both a fad and an investment.¹⁰ The trend intensifies and at the same time is intensified by the objectification of the female body and retrograde status of women in contemporary China, after the more progressive gender discourses and governmental policies of the socialist period had been weakened. As

suggested in *Dragonfly*, women are only regarded as potential sexual objects in the capitalist-patriarchal system, and social and cultural surveillance reduces their value to mere "appearance." Thus, in *Dragonfly*, suffering from discrimination and disempowerment because of her "plain looks," Qingting finally convinces herself: "You either need to change your way of thinking, or change your appearance." She invests in plastic surgery, and her "improved" appearance becomes capital, a means of profit-generation facilitated by "live-streaming," a new medial tool of self-surveillance that fetishizes youth and glamor. Live-streamers become attractive and desirable commodities in a dominant male-chauvinist heterosexual gender discourse, selling their looks, performativity, and sexuality. Therefore, they are simultaneously *promoters of commodities* and *the commodities they promote*, the merchandise and their marketing agents (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 32). However, does the film's title "Dragonfly Eyes" suggest Qingting's vision, agency, and subjectivity? As one critic notes, it is "not that security cameras see too much, but that women do" (Grbich 2018, 36). Nevertheless, Qingting/Xiaoxiao's agency is compromised in the middle of the film as the narration shifts from her first-person yet omniscient perspective to Ke Fan's, as her story and death are witnessed and told by him.

As Paula Albuquerque argues, webcam-generated video and live-streaming bear witness to the fact that surveillance practices are increasingly internalized; people appear to welcome the presence of cameras, thereby accepting the constant exposure of everyday life (Albuquerque 2018, 30).¹¹ Young women who live-stream potentially channel the hedonistic desires of mostly male virtual followers whose "social value" and self-esteem depend upon their

“purchasing power.” At the same time, since “members of the society of consumers are themselves consumer commodities” (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 34), consumers are also dehumanized and alienated within a system that reinforces and reproduces social divisions. Ross Abbinnett argues that as “media technologies … reoriented the desire of human beings, a new epoch of techno-psychical manipulation begins in which culture industries take control of the reflective and aesthetic faculties of each individual” (Abbinnett 2018, 5). Desire is created, standardized, and overdetermined by consumer capitalist exploitation of technology. New forms of self-exposure demonstrate the dangers of narcissism, of being consumed by unproductive self-absorption in a society of loners caught in a vicious circle of aimless self-adoration, as Jean Baudrillard has warned us (Baudrillard 2002, 482). The “virtual” and the “real” are intertwined, just as digital realism can be unreal. In Paul Virilio’s view, the webcam is part of this transfiguration of everyday life; it is essential to effect a split in primary reality by developing a *stereo-reality*, made up on the one hand of the *actual reality* of immediate appearances and, on the other hand, of the virtual reality of media trans-appearance (Virilio 2000, 15).

Self-exposure is an economy in the digital era, one that Anthony Giddens has called a “weightless economy;” as pleasure-producing entertainment, it operates according to different principles from the industrial economy that preceded it (Hutton and Giddens 2000, 1). It has also been defined as an “attention economy” in which attention and stardom become the currency and goal (Goldhaber 1997; Beller 2006; Peters and Seier 2009; Wise 2002, 430). Cyber-visuality turns a profit within the frame of aggressive capitalism, becoming “an increasing practice of self-staging and self-stylization, which

in turn is considered a trademark of digital mass culture” (Peters and Seier 2009, 188). In a world of self-exposure through social media, being seen becomes a matter of privilege and desire, and the link between personal performance, celebrity, and surveillance is mediated by the corporate structures of technology (Lyon 2018, 70–71). Live-streaming has become a fast-expanding economic sector in China that has given birth, for instance, to training centers and textbooks teaching people how to become internet celebrities and has made significant contributions to local economies (cf. Xu 2017a). In *Dragonfly*, Xiaoxiao/Qingting and live-streamers use the self as a creative and economic resource and a neoliberal self-marketing tool. Yet live-streaming also commercializes and dehumanizes young people and their interactions. Chinese filmmaker Hao Wu’s documentary *People’s Republic of Desire* (2018) captures the live-streaming industry and features live-streamers showcasing their talents in virtual showrooms, searching for fame and fortune in the digital idol-making media environment. These live-streamers are vulnerable to exploitation as they are easily manipulated by commercial corporations and agents eager to ensure maximum profits.

In live-streaming, intimacy and privacy are for sale; the practice records the entry of global technological capitalism into the intimacies of personal life. Work and private life are now subject to mediation (Peters and Seier 2009, 189). The private is public, to be celebrated and consumed by countless “friends” as well as casual “users” (Lyon 2013, 19). *Dragonfly* links the commodification of technologically-mediated intimacy to the invasion, complication, and redefinition of privacy. In the case of Xiaoxiao, work



Fig. 1: *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017). Courtesy of Xu Bing studio.



Fig. 2: *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017). Courtesy of Xu Bing studio.

and private life seemingly converge. She displays herself in front of the webcam in an intimate setting such as a bedroom, and this becomes her “work.” Exposure becomes a selling point to attract voyeuristic (male) followers.

Mark Andrejevic conceptualizes such live-streaming spaces as “digital enclosures.” While capitalism has always worked by means of enclosures (for instance, fields and the factory floor), the new digital enclosures include leisure spaces that become work spaces in which one’s leisure time and activity are transformed into labor (Andrejevic 2004; Wise 2002, 430). Capitalist exploitation in the digital age has become more disguised and more severe. Although live-streamers expose most of their lives onscreen, they may need to protect their emotional privacy (and true identity in some cases) from the general public. For instance, in *Dragonfly*, Xiaoxiao professionally and coquettishly flirts with and extracts money from Ke Fan over the internet, but she never reveals her identity (as Qingting) or her true emotions to him. He is just another customer, one who would potentially pay for her camouflaged cyber-personality. The characters are locked in a neoliberal regime of performative capitalism, where human life is distinguished by constant, technologically-enhanced performativity (Abbinnett 2018, 7–8). While Xiaoxiao’s performativity might suggest a strong sense of artificiality, for her enchanted followers she represents the real and even the ideal.

Live-streaming can also be understood as a practice that expands rather than delimits the visibility of its users. As David Lyon claims, “surveillance is clearly enjoyable, empowering and playful for some, and this should be appreciated for the meaningful cultural phenomenon that it is” (Lyon 2018, 24). For lower-class young people lacking social,

financial, and cultural capital like Qingting/Xiaoxiao, live-streaming provides opportunities for social mobility and material abundance in an “attention economy” facilitated by new technology and media. This potential is exemplified by the Chinese “desktop documentary” *Present Perfect* (*Wan mei xian zai shi*, Zhu Shengze, 2019), edited from 800 hours of live-streaming footage available online. The film features five subjects who are mostly marginalized people, such as men with disabilities and a female migrant worker, and who are almost invisible in public spheres and mainstream commercial media. At times, they may appear undesirable—the opposite of surgically-modified glamorous online celebrities—but they are also therefore likely to be exoticized for their “abnormality.” They live-stream their daily lives, explain their unfortunate situations, and communicate with their followers without being promoted and manipulated by any corporate organizations; they are the few fortunate ones who get attention among numerous spontaneous, individual users of live-streaming platforms popular through China (such as *Douyu*, *Douyin*, *Kuaishou*, *Huya*, *Bilibili*, *Xigua*, among others).¹²

The popularity of the subjects of *Present Perfect* is not only symptomatic of the widespread embrace of capitalist self-surveillance media around the globe, but also reveals some of the cultural, social, and historical specificities of contemporary China. Most of the subjects are from rural villages or small towns, and some are migrant workers living in another city. Their experiences epitomize Chinese social issues such as the urban-rural divide, mass migration, and social stratification. In a relaxed and intimate atmosphere, and in sharp contrast with the spectacular artificiality of “web celebrities,” they live-stream mundane routines such as eating, working,

walking, and chatting. By establishing online communities, these live-streamers seek emotional connections and mutual understanding, even though some of their followers' interest may be based in curiosity or even voyeurism. In *Present Perfect*, a disabled young man finally overcomes the trauma of being bullied in childhood and his enduring sense of humiliation; after being encouraged by another disabled live-streamer and his own cyber followers, he visits public spaces from which he has isolated himself for years and later finds a factory job in another city. As Zygmunt Bauman has shown and as this case bears out, the fear of disclosure has been eclipsed by the joy of being noticed. For certain underrepresented groups, the promise of enhanced visibility chimes with social recognition and proof of a valued, "meaningful" existence (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 26, 110). In this sense, live-streaming makes the invisible visible and renders the ignored present, even striking. It allows people to claim a foothold in an admittedly alien and inhospitable world. For such persons, live-streaming expands their social boundaries and enhances their sense of subjectivity and self-empowerment.

While these modes of self-surveillance are deeply entwined with postindustrial, neoliberal global capitalism, older forms of surveillance persist within our changing economic structures. The surveillance technology used in the cattle farm in *Dragonfly* where Qingting first works recalls Karl Marx's argument about monitoring factory workers to ensure their compliance as a disciplined labor force in industrial capitalism. Marx's insight is vividly demonstrated in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936), when Charlie takes out a cigar in the restroom of the factory, only to be sharply rebuked by the boss who suddenly appears on a big telescreen on the wall. For Marx, surveillance was

located within the struggles between labor and capital; its purpose was to maintain control on behalf of capital and maximize technical efficiency (Lyon 1994, 25). The temporalities and technologies of industrial capitalism coexist within, and are even magnified by, new forms of capitalism. In *Dragonfly*, the surveillance technology employed to monitor workers mirrors that of the factory but is much more advanced. As Ke Fan explains, the manager can remotely scrutinize workers and cows via his smart phone from another country, unconfined by physical distance. Electronic surveillance also suggests the forces of standardization and impersonalization in industrial and post-industrial capitalism alike, as both workers and cows are called by numbers rather than names, and both eat the standardized food in the factory every day (although the cows get greater variety).

In *Dragonfly*, such scenes of standardized surveillance convey a sense of "realness" due to the illusion of simultaneity, "telepresence," and instantaneity; however, the low-resolution, sometimes monochrome and silent imagery also creates a feeling of artificial mediation or "unrealness," because "many sensory and spatial dimensions are lost" (Wise 2004, 428). How should we understand the tension and complexity of surveillance footage in relation to temporality, cinematic ontology, and digital realism? These issues will be the subject of the next section.

II.Digital Realism: The Ultra-real and the Unreal

Beyond its engagement in social commentary, *Dragonfly* is a reflection on and re-understanding of the nature of digital images. As the film shows, the deeply haunting strangeness of technologically-mediated reality can be so real that it becomes unreal.

When it comes to the ontology of photographic realism, it is necessary to turn to the French film critic André Bazin. Bazin argues that, in comparison to traditional visual forms such as painting, photography and cinema are ontologically more realistic since the image is an automatic mechanical reproduction devoid of direct human intervention such as a painter's hand; the operator may select the camera angle but does not artificially change the nature of image reproduction (Bazin 2005). Since the late 1990s, the revaluation of classical film theory including Bazin's has itself taken place against the development of digital technologies that have once again foregrounded fundamental, or rather ontological, questions about image-based media (Hassan 2017, 38). Francesco Casetti, for example, argues that in moving from analog to digital, we may assume that the end of the "photographic era" does not necessarily imply the end of a realistic attitude, as long as digital imagery restores the texture of reality and creates the realistic effect with formal devices or thematic components (Casetti 2011).

Following Bazin, on the ontological level (if we do not emphasize the photochemical-digital transformations) footage generated by surveillance cameras might be regarded as totally self-generating and autonomous, a kind of ultra-realism, since it is devoid of any human intervention, even the cameraman selecting camera angles or shot scales. Surveillance cameras are used for practical purposes rather than aesthetic ones: they have fixed angles, positions, and framings; they are almost always static, with high angles and long shots; and they cover the largest possible spatial and visual spectrum in order to collect the maximum information within their range. As Paola Baretto Leblanc argues, "[p]aradoxically the surveillance

camera is there to assure that nothing significant occurs ... visibility here is associated with deviation; the image only has perceptible value if something abnormal occurs" (Leblanc 2009, 104).

And yet, Xu Bing realized that the images captured by surveillance cameras are at once vivid and peculiar, transcending our traditional notions of photo-aesthetics (cf. Xu 2017b). Leblanc also considers that the surveillance image, when removed from its preventative or repressive functions, "allows a poetic of the ordinary to bloom" (Leblanc 2009, 108). *Dragonfly* draws attention to the fact that a "surveillance camera" is not a fixed entity; rather, such cameras are diverse and subject to technological development and transformation. For instance, in *Dragonfly*'s database, the footage recorded in earlier years (pre-2000s) is silent, black-and-white, and in low resolution with fixed camera positions. Later footage is in color, with higher resolution and even some sound recording. The most recent surveillance cameras feature night mode and automatic zooms, which are capable of tracking and stretching the camera lens using embedded AI technology (Xu 2019, 131). These distinct phases and kinds of surveillance footage make the visual quality and texture of *Dragonfly* heterogeneous. Speaking of the film's images, Kraicer notes that "some [are] sharp, some very compressed, some heavily pixilated, some with smooth motion, others jumpy or seemingly plagued by constant jitters" (Kraicer 2018, 49).

In a digital age, "realism" is not just indexical or ontological but "perceptual," "a correspondence-based model of cinematic representation" (Prince 1996) and "an impression of reality" (Gunning 2007). The illusion of reality and the impression of "the real" created on screen were both pivotal in classical Hollywood cinema. As Xu has observed, in most fictional films images

are manipulated to create a realistic illusion. This was not the case when moving images were first invented with the purpose of reflecting and reproducing reality (Xu and Zhai 2017). In this sense, surveillance footage might be considered a return to the origins of moving images with their long takes. And yet this formulation is complicated in *Dragonfly*, for which Xu and his team used found footage to effect a reversal of conventional filmmaking. Instead of turning actors into fictional characters and creating an illusion of realism from human-made footage, Xu transformed real people into actors and constructed a fictional narrative from automatic footage—the hyper-real becomes unreal precisely because it is too real. Furthermore, the assorted low-resolution footage pulled from different temporalities (suggested by timecodes imprinted on the surveillance images) creates a layer of visible mediation, a kind of alienation effect. For instance, in some surveillance footage, visual staccato and freeze moments disrupt the smooth reproduction of space and temporal duration, accentuating the texture, materiality, and medium of surveillance video.

The production of *Dragonfly* itself was marked by disruption and experimentation. At first, Xu and his team erased the timecodes and edited the video according to the principles of classical fictional cinema, but found this made the film too smooth. It had lost its edge and power, since all the elements worked towards Hollywood-style perceptual illusory “realism” with typical causality in narration and continuity in editing devoid of tension. Later, the collaborators realized that they needed distance from realism and went in the opposite direction, generating a sense of alienation that ultimately emancipated the narrative (Xu 2019, 131). In *Dragonfly*, many fragmentary shots of people and

places from all over China are edited together into a linear narrative that serves to transform the spatial into the temporal; the final film temporalizes the spatial. But the film also preserves the various timecodes and source information embedded in its pixelated surveillance images, juxtaposing different temporalities and breaking the illusion of visual continuity and temporal consistency. The film’s sense of perceptual and cognitive confusion, then, can be understood as a manner of contemplating and critiquing the illusion of realism in mainstream cinema.

According to Xu Bing, since the surveillance footage does not provide recurring figures or characters, Qingting’s and Ke Fan’s voices had to be consistent in order to ensure the audience’s aural identification of the characters. Herein lies the film’s energetic audiovisual tension: visual inconsistency and aural consistency. Different real men and women captured in surveillance footage become the two main fictional characters in *Dragonfly*, for which “individual differences are blurred as involuntary actors in disparate locations are written into these singular protagonists” (Grbich 2018, 32). The film’s audiovisual tension and volatility echoes its main characters’ unstable appearances and uncertain identities, constantly reinvented and fluid. The film’s interest in “plastic surgery” adds another layer of meaning to its assemblage of miscellaneous surveillance footage; in addition to the sociopolitical and symbolic significance discussed in the previous section, the thread of “plastic surgery” in *Dragonfly* provides visual inconsistency with narrative pretext. Through plastic surgery, Qingting becomes Xiaoxiao, and Ke Fan becomes Qingting. On the surface or in substance? What are their “true” identities? Qingting visually becomes Xiaoxiao, yet her voice does not change

and is recognized by Ke Fan; Ke Fan becomes Qingting and returns to the monastery where an older nun tells him/her: “your look hasn't changed, but your voice and tone are those of another person.”

As the film highlights, human identity becomes malleable and indistinct as much in virtual life as after “plastic surgery.” And the transformation of one's identity—conforming to the trends of commercialization in contemporary capitalism—is completed through a “beautification” of “look/surface/appearance” that can “defy” even surveillance technology. In the beginning of *Dragonfly*, a rich businessman's investment in “renovating” the temple leads to the destruction of an ancient gingko tree and the *fengshui* of the temple. This violent “plastic surgery” of the temple disturbs the nun Qingting's spiritual equilibrium and catapults her into the secular world, where she later goes through “plastic surgery” herself without, however, being bothered by the change of her own facial *fengshui*. Ironically, although surveillance technology uses facial recognition software and other algorithm-based tracking tools on a massive scale, plastic surgery makes the implementation of “facial identification” challenging, either because young women after plastic surgery look too much alike or because their faces no longer match their identity documents. Both human eyes and surveillance eyes are defeated. In *Dragonfly*, a police officer faced with images of young women with identical faces in his efforts to trace Xiaoxiao after her disappearance, remarks: “if we can't tell them apart, what chance do surveillance cameras have?” Both human eyes and surveillance eyes are defeated by such physical alterations. “Plastic surgery,” that is, creates a sense of anonymity, albeit

unintentionally, echoed by *Dragonfly*'s deliberate assemblage of visual traces randomly created by physical presences in material reality.

Dragonfly is intentionally fragmentary and visually disorienting; however, sounds suture and anchor these fractures. Voice dubbing and sound design are vital to construct a consistent fictional narrative with relatively convincing characters. Sound design (including dialogue and ambient sounds) here differ from standard fictional films. Reconstructing silent surveillance footage into a narrative and creating a credible soundscape was entirely achieved during postproduction in the studio. All dialogue in *Dragonfly* was written and dubbed—as Xu claims, “it may be one of the most ‘soundtracked’ films ever made” (Xu 2017a). The sound designer Li Danfeng recounts the team's efforts to construct dialogues to ensure their narrative function, to sync the voice actors' tone, pitch, and timbre to their characters, and to adjust the texture and volume across different acoustic spaces. Although the voice acting has been criticized as amateurish, this very quality again creates an alienating distance resonant with its “surveillance look.”

Moreover, sound design and editing were intertwined in the process of making the film. The sound designer and editor constantly communicated in order to inspire each other (cf. Li 2018). As with the film's editing, the voice layers also suggest complicated perspectives and address the multiple mediations that occur within the narration, including the partial perspective of the characters and the police who investigate Xiaoxiao's disappearance as well as the omniscient perspective of the computer hub. In the middle of the film, with a title announcing “three years later,” the perspective switches from Qingting to Ke Fan, who gets released

from prison and starts looking for Qingting. We see (and hear) a few police officers in the surveillance footage examining other surveillance footage in front of a computer screen. They fast forward and rewind, zoom in on certain shots, and freeze specific images as they attempt to figure out whether Xiaoxiao jumped from a bridge or was pushed. We also hear an omniscient robotized voiceover analyzing human activities and natural environments. This voice sounds half-human and half-AI, manifestly artificial, an obvious surveillance metaphor. The sense of acoustic “authenticity” suggested by amateurish voice acting and the sense of the “unreal” evoked by the computerized voice are at once in juxtaposition and tension.

In comparison to the understated and realistic sound design in *Dragonfly*, the film’s editing is more pronounced and occasionally flamboyant.

Surveillance footage can be formulaic, repetitive, and monotonous. In Steven Shaviro’s words, “video surveillance ... watches over even the emptiest expanses of space, and it registers vast stretches of time in which nothing whatsoever happens” (Shaviro 2003, 36). Surveillance footage only gains new meanings after the editing process. In *Dragonfly*, editing techniques commonly used in fictional films—such as analytical editing, continuity editing, and parallel editing—are dexterously employed.¹³ In contrast to the ordinary emptiness of surveillance footage, the film’s election and assemblage practices depict a world in which there is always something happening or about to happen. Action either serves the film’s narrative functions or, in a series shocking montage sequences, “turn[s] everyday life into a theatrical spectacle” (Hillier 1996, 102). For instance, contingent natural and human-made catastrophes emphasize the “unrealness” and absurdity of

reality. Under such circumstances, the most mundane footage could look suspenseful, since unexpected disaster can explode in the next second. According to Xu Bing, most surveillance footage is so quiet that it becomes scary or eerie; once something happens, the footage is instantly beyond our control and imagination, proving that we live in an unpredictable world. Although not directly related to the plot, the disaster collages comment on the love story between Qingting and Ke Fan and act as a foil to the characters’ sentiments; in a chaotic and corrupt world, romantic love, privacy, and intimacy seem both fragile and trivial (Xu 2019, 133).

The display of “more ‘pure,’ plotless montages” (Kraicer 2018, 49) of sensationalist violence and horrors such as fatal accidents, car crashes, and explosions even includes a viscerally unsettling real death. *Dragonfly* opens with a long take in which a girl falls into a canal and drowns. We witness the whole silent process of her death in real duration under the indifferent gaze of the surveillance camera. Towards the end of her struggle, the film manipulates temporality by fast-forwarding to the result: the serene surface of the canal that had just swallowed a human life. As one critic points out, “this footage is as horrific as it is banal and dispassionate, for it is real” (Frazier 2018, 78). The choice foregrounds questions of ethics and exploitation in nonfiction footage, that is, “the ethical tensions of appropriating the surveilled lives of strangers for creative pursuits” (McKay 2013, 334). This is reminiscent of André Bazin’s essay, “Death Every Afternoon,” in which Bazin argues that like the sexual act, death is in its own way the absolute negative of objective time, the qualitative instant in its purest form. It must be experienced and cannot be represented without violating its nature. “The representation

of a real death," Bazin observes, "is an obscenity, no longer a moral one, rather a metaphysical one. We do not die twice ... [It is] an intolerable sight not so much for its objective horror as for its ontological obscenity" (Bazin 2003, 30).

The ethical issue of this opening sequence is magnified by its repetition, as the girl dies on the screen every time *Dragonfly* is shown. However, in Shelly Kraicer's view, the contextualization of such sequences allows them to activate and implicate our ethical self-questioning; it is this ambivalence-generating mechanism that makes the film so disquieting and disorienting, and gives it a novel destabilizing power (Kraicer 2018, 49). Andrea Lingenfelter notes that Buddhist concepts and themes—the idea that human beings exist in an endless cycle of life and death and rebirth—are central to the film and embodied by the relationship between Qingting/Xiaoxiao and Ke Fan (Lingenfelter 2018). As Ke contemplates at the film's end: "Will I have Qingting's past, or my own future?" With its re-sue and re-editing of surveillance footage, *Dragonfly* stages a claim about the possibilities of new life.

Conclusion

Dragonfly edits, aestheticizes, and transforms surveillance footage of various types. Attending to the discursive sociopolitical connotations of such footage while utilizing shot blocks and soundtrack to enhance new meanings, the film raises questions about the ultra-real and unreal technological mediations of informational capitalism's present and future. The highly metaphorical story in *Dragonfly* holds together its assemblage of dispersed and silent surveillance footage, as does the film's reliance on scripted and dubbed dialogues, fabricated ambient sounds, and voiceover narration. Surveillance in *Dragonfly* is not just

a top-down instrument of political manipulation, but also a profit-making and distraction-inducing technology that anticipates a dystopian vision of nihilism and sensorial indulgence imbued with an old form of religiosity: Buddhist samsara, within whose discourse "reality" is "illusory and impermanent" (Rayns 2018, 19). The crew was also able to track, identify, and contact most of the real people appearing in the film to obtain their permissions for image rights, facilitated by GPS information appearing on the footage, yet another layer of surveillance.¹⁴

Making a fictional film without actors, a cinematographer, studio, or shooting process, Xu and his team have practiced a new model of "filmmaking," one which is only possible with contemporary developments in digital technology and media, that is, the availability of surveillance footage databases. As Xu notes, no single image was made or manipulated by human agency in *Dragonfly*—instead, "surveillance cameras all over China are all our cameramen" (Xu 2017c). Xu links this filmmaking method with recent so-called "sharing economy" business models in technological capitalism (Uber, Airbnb, Postmates, and so on) (cf. Xu 2017c) that use computational support to provide a platform to connect labor forces, consumers, and commodities, without the need for "raw materials" or hiring a large number of workers. As the twenty computers in Xu's studio incessantly collected and downloaded surveillance footage, his studio was connected to all of China, which in turn became an enormous film set. This practice inspires a new understanding of the so-called "boundaries of reality" (Xu 2017d). And the distribution of *Dragonfly* further connects the "local gaze" of surveillance footage from different places in China to a global community of spectators of *Dragonfly*.

in art galleries, and film theaters, and international film festivals. Thus surveillance seems to “transcend both spatial and temporal barriers” (McCahill 1998, 41).

Surveillance images are intended for the future. They suggest the contours of the social imagination under capitalism. According to David Lyon, “in the present, ironically, presence is downplayed in the paradoxical unreality of ‘real time.’ While the surveillance camera captures certain images in the instant the event occurs, it is its role in the future, not the present, that counts. Yet that future is itself seen in simulated forms” (Lyon 2006, 14). *Dragonfly* begins to consider that surveillance images could alter our view of history if the past were preserved only or primarily in the audiovisual archive. There is a mystical cosmic concept of “geomagnetic recording” in the film that magnetic fields can preserve what happens in certain times and places, and even project the “truth” to a future time and space. In Xu’s words: “these even supernatural and unexplainable phenomena have been recorded

by surveillance cameras, only if we could preserve these images to future generations (these are automatically deleted and overlaid by new ones)!” (Xu 2017d) If surveillance is installed to prevent something from happening in the future, yet surveillance footage (if preserved) becomes an archive for the past; when surveillance footage is viewed, there is always a strong sense of “the present.” “Surveillance” encompasses ideas about predicting and controlling the future, ideas inflected with technologically determinist tendencies. The primary purpose of surveillance is to foresee, prepare, and control for the range of possible outcomes that could result from present actions and conditions (Gates 2017, 188). With more advanced surveillance gadgets and strategies, would the overproduction and increased circulation of surveillance images suggest a hyper-surveillant audiovisual future and hyper-mediated intimacy? As a highly reflexive film, *Dragonfly* epitomizes and embodies the precarious potentials of the digital future of capitalism, both invigorating and bleak, expressive and corrupt.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the editors Camil Ungureanu, Sonia Arribas, Rebecca Anne Peters, and Albert Elduque for their patience and support, and two anonymous reviewers for their inspiring suggestions. Stephanie Su, Jin Xu, Erica Stein, Po-hsi Chen, Luo Gang, Hannah Brooks-Motl, and Ingrid Becker have provided insightful comments on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Angela Xiao Wu, Mark Williams, Pao-chen Tang, Michelle Stewart, Noelle Griffis, Yomi Braester, Renren Yang, Tang Hongfeng, Belinda Qian He, and Da Mengna of Xu Bing studio for their generous help in preparing for this article.

1/ This is distinct from “data-surveillance,” which designates the systematic collection, analysis, and categorization of data from citizens, mostly without their knowledge, for purposes such as security and marketing. Data-surveillance results in the requisition of personal privacy, racial discrimination, and commercial manipulation. See Lyon’s *The Electronic Eye* (1994) and Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019).

2/ For instance, *Der Riese* (Michael Klier, 1984, 82 min), *In Order Not to Be Here* (Deborah Stratman, 2002, 33 min), *Faceless* (Manu Luksch, 2007, 50 min), *We Live*

in Public (Ondi Timoner, 2009, 91 min), *Low Definition Control—Malfunctions # 0* (Michael Palm, 2011, 95 min), and *The Road Movie* (*Doroga*, Dmitrii Kalashnikov, 2016, 67 min).

3/ The beginning credits state: “the images used in this film were captured by the large numbers of observation cameras and CCTV security systems found in Seoul.”

4/ Others include *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *EDtv* (Ron Howard, 1999), the science fiction film *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glasser, 1987), and so forth.

5/ In a Chinese context, similar works include *Disorder* (*Xianshi shi guoqu de weilai*, Huang Weikai, 2009, 58 min), a documentary constructed from footage made by amateur videographers in Guangzhou, and *Whose Eyes* (Tan Tan, 2011, 15 min), a four-channel video work about daily violence and moral degeneration in contemporary China composed of both surveillance footage and staged shots imitating surveillance footage. For more information, see Braester’s “The City as Found Footage: The Reassemblage of Chinese Urban Space” (2016).

6/ According to the credits at the end of the film, some footage was captured outside of mainland China, for instance, from Taiwan, Afghanistan, and Spain. The film features Xu Bing’s statement: “I have wanted to make a film from surveillance footage since 2013, but I had no access to the necessary resources. Since 2015, surveillance cameras in China have been linked to the cloud database: countless surveillance recordings have been streamed online. So I took up the project again. I collected a huge amount of footage and tried to use these fragments of reality to tell a story.”

7/ For more information about this project, see: <http://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/188?classID=12&type=class> [accessed January 15, 2020].

8/ Xu Bing and Chinese construction workers created the installation work *Phoenix* from 2007 to 2010. It features two monumental phoenixes (each measures approximately one hundred feet long and together weigh twelve tons) fabricated entirely from materials salvaged from construction sites in urban China, including demolition debris, steel beams, tools, and remnants of the daily lives of migrant laborers. The mystical birds bear witness to the complex interconnection between labor, history, capital, and commercial development in contemporary China. Both in the West and in China the motif and mythology of the phoenix correspond to the idea of rebirth. The installations were exhibited briefly outdoors at the Today Art Museum in Beijing, and then at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. In April 2013, the internally illuminated birds premiered outside China when they were suspended mid-air inside MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art). For more information, see: <https://massmoca.org/event/xu-bing-phoenix/> The Phoenixes were also exhibited in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in Morningside Heights, New York City for one year in 2014. For a more deliberate discussion of this work and its political connotations, see Junjie Jiang’s “The Doubleness of Sight/Site: Xu Bing’s *Phoenix* as an Intended Public Art Project” (2018).

9/ Emphasized by Xu Bing in an interview (cf. Lee 2018).

10/ It is also a practical storytelling device on which I will expand in the next section.

11/ In China, as Renren Yang argues, “although the security camera intends to overawe criminals and preempt possible crimes, the public in a viewer society nevertheless have developed a habitual insensitivity to the existence of those discreet camera-eyes” (Yang 2017, 263).

12/ For a list ranking the most popular Chinese live-streaming platforms in 2019, see: <http://www.enet.com.cn/article/2019/0716/A20190716948154.html> [accessed January 13, 2020]. Live-streaming sprouted in the early 2000s in China and exploded in 2015 and 2016, during which more than 700 live streaming platforms appeared; later it developed into a more centralized industry monopoly. It started with video gaming and expanded to live-streamers chatting with viewers, singing, and eventually exploring new business models such as e-commerce. 17% of all people

in China have watched a live-streaming video. Live-streamers make money from “tips,” and sometimes tipping or gifting becomes a competition to flaunt wealth, to fight for attention and to induce envy from other viewers. It is a fantasy sold to the working-class viewers, to make them believe that they brought one of *them* up the social ladder with their collective power. Some factory workers spend a considerable portion or even *all* of their salary on tipping their favorite live-streamer. For more information, see Siyi Chen’s “Is This Real Life: The Live Streaming Craze Explained” (2019).

13/ The professional French editor Matthieu Laclau and Japanese composer Yoshihiro Hanno who worked on *Dragonfly Eyes* had both worked on Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart* (*Shan he gu ren*, 2015), and were recommended by Jia to Xu.

14/ There is a statement in the end of the film as such: “we have obtained the image rights of most people who appear in this film. However, there are still a few people we haven't been able to reach. If you should be any of them, please kindly contact us at qingtingzhiyan@163.com.”

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Schefer, Jean-Louis. 2016.
The Ordinary Man of Cinema.
Translated by Max Cavitch. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 224 pp.

Date of reception: 23/09/2019

Date of acceptance: 17/03/2020

Albeit little known in the Anglophone world until recently, readers may have briefly glossed over philosopher and “film poet” Jean-Louis Schefer in Deleuze’s commentary in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. In this book’s second chapter, “Recapitulation of Images and Signs,” Deleuze’s thesis crystallizes: that cinema does not “represent” time but, via Bergsonian *durée* (or “pure duration,” which is a product of movement), allows us to directly perceive temporal presentation. Following Bergson, Deleuze speaks of affects, which, unlike sensation and emotion, are tied to flux and movement. This thesis, however, was prognosticated by Schefer’s little book on cinema, *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* (originally published in 1980), in which Schefer similarly speaks of film as an experience of time relayed as perception. As Deleuze corroborates, “Jean-Louis Schefer ... showed that the ordinary cinema-viewer, the man without qualities, found his correlate in the movement-image as extraordinary movement” (1989, 37). The shared conclusion between Schefer and Deleuze is on the “aberration” of movement that is uniquely filmic, prodding cinema into “extraordinary” territories, unbinding temporal restraints and wresting the moving image from its material stasis by engendering a direct presentation of phenomenological time.

Schefer emphasizes that cinema is the art of gestures, as it makes manifest the unconsciousness “force of action latent in things” (2016, 29). If affect is Schefer’s unmooring, then gesture is his berth. Schefer’s writing on cinema designates gesture as presymbolic and a well of pure means, whereby taxonomy is displaced in favor of a kind of sublime breach. This is made clear in cinema’s moving images, wherein “[t]he reproduction of gestures” is translated into “the reproduction of movement in images.”

However, in addition to movement, Schefer's thesis on cinema is also couched in a nexus of *philia* that is a profoundly social vector. As Nico Baumbach prudently remarks, Schefer is deeply interested in the public, ritualized experience of film viewership, where the cinema-viewer shares a dark room with strangers (Baumbach 2017). This social experience is far removed from our new media/post-cinema semblance of reticulated laptop screens and media prostheses, which have ushered cinema into the personalized becoming of the *viewser* (a neologism of viewer-user; Daly 2010).

Schefer also shares another point of convergence with Deleuze, this time on the "Postulates of Linguistics"—on the overdetermination of the signifier. In tune with Deleuze and Guattari's remarks from *A Thousand Plateaus*, Schefer writes that cinema illuminates affects that are "urgently invisible, non-represented, and unformulated," producing a "criminal pleasure," whereby "signification, words and images no longer represent anyone" (2016, 196).

Schefer, much like Deleuze, is interested in a kind of "pure affect" produced by internal bodies that addresses an occluded "interior history," which consciousness is barred access to but made aware of upon its filmic mediation—that occurs as the viewer unwittingly becomes an extended object recast within the film's scenographies. Surveying a cinematic backdrop of "body genres"—Schefer's book is exclusively composed of references to horror and burlesque genre films such as Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), Terence Fisher's *The Mummy* (1959) and Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932)—Schefer is "concerned not with the effects on our physical bodies" (Baumbach 2017, 2) but, instead, with the assurance of a kind of "perpetuity outside" of immediate conscious knowledge (Schefer 2016, 17). If it is through Bergson that we can phenomenologically root Deleuze's notion of affect, it is through Schefer that we can gesture beyond affect-as-apprehension and somatic response: "[f]or those new appearances—in which we must sometimes accommodate partial objects in order to grasp them, and whose full form and reference we always misapprehend—are affects" (2016, 210). Cinema's wry secret is how we are foreclosed access to its full epistemic terrain, which produces sublimity.

According to Schefer, the cinema-goer is actively complicit in "a crime." However, this "crime" is neither that of perpetrating abuses in the world nor of passive voyeurism but, instead, a crime of "historical origin," in which the spectator regains lost time and memory (history's annals of world-images) through the labor of cinematic memory. Consequently, Schefer's movie-goer is historically ingratiated, complicit in the archive of moving images that record history and the Earth's lesions.

Schefer's bodily concerns with cinema are aporetic, invested in the violent limits of apperceptive noetic activity, wherein our frustrations, terrors or yearnings seduce us into the overpowering cinephilic experience. As Schefer notes in *The Enigmatic Body*:

“[a]t bottom, the cinema is an abattoir. People go to the abattoir, not to see images coming one after the other. Something else happens inside them: a structure that is otherwise acquired, otherwise possible, painful in other way, and which is perhaps tied inside us to the necessity of producing meaning and language” (1995, 121)

Rather than speaking of beauty, the “sublime” reappears as a trauma. For Schefer, cinema is a public spectacle of “death and deformation,” or something of a sublimated “side show.” Thus, Schefer’s curious penchant for Browning’s *Freaks*, a film that was met with such revulsion that an MGM test-screening audience member famously claimed that viewing the film resulted in her miscarriage. The “sublime” that Schefer returns to in *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* is not Kant’s notion of the mathematical sublime of propensity or the dynamical sublime of mortality but, instead, akin to Edmund Burke’s articulation of the empirical-philosophical underpinnings of what John Dennis had dubbed “delightful horror,” stilted on a notion of “complex,” or mixed, pleasure and pain (Doran 2017, 11). Here unfolds Schefer’s description of *jouissance* as “a suffering that is not linked to a particular suspension of the world but ... privileged transition of meaning ... that suspends the world” (2016, 142). While Burke’s language of the sublime similarly details “positive pleasure ... impressed with a sense of awe” (2015, 31), Schefer’s enumerative account of horror evinces the relationship between *jouissance* and sublimity via the privileged spectator-position of the suspended cinema-goer, where the horror depicted on-screen is presented through an order of removal.

Schefer is a poet, philosopher, and theorist of enigmas—thus, Deleuze called *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* a “great poem.” Schefer’s enigmatic writing often flirts and lapses between circular whimsical versification, at times veering closer to literature than to cogent theory. Nonetheless, Schefer’s style adequately maps his concerns with inchoate phenomena, which will not, or cannot, be accounted for by our legitimized systems of representation or our rational procedures of interpretation. As Tom Conley notes, Schefer’s text “makes physic demands on the part of everyone willing enough to work through its often imponderable reflections” (2010, 13). Nonetheless, Schefer’s work is rewarding and ought not to be simply reduced to the superficial terms of a Deleuzian primer or poetic musings. Schefer’s interest in repressed violence and

debris—of sublimity and phenomenology—uniquely situates itself within a kind of poetic wakening of cinema that is often neglected in today’s film theory, which all too often deviates towards the emotive experience of the body or cognitivist scientism. Schefer offers us a glimpse at what an unpretentious film theory may look like when it “philosophizes by accident.”

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**Oter, Jorge and Santos Zunzunegui.
eds. 2019. *Ensayos de poética.
Miradas sobre el contacto entre
el cine y la poesía.* Leioa: Servicio
Editorial de la Universidad del País
Vasco. 120 pp.**

Date of reception: 18/10/2019

Date of acceptance: 18/03/2020

A three-day summer course *Cine y poesía. Del hecho poético a la página filmada* was held in the city of Bilbao, Spain, in June 2015. Organised by Jorge Oter and Santos Zunzunegui in collaboration with the research group “Mutaciones del Audiovisual Contemporáneo” from the Universidad del País Vasco, the event gathered speakers from a variety of cinematographic backgrounds, both from theory and practice, to present their research on the relations between cinema and poetry. It also traced a brief journey through the history of the moving image which culminated in the publication *Ensayos de poética. Miradas sobre el contacto entre el cine y la poesía*.

Structured into five texts, three of which are written by academics and two by practitioners, *Ensayos de poética* explores the dialogue between cinema and poetry from remarkably diverse points of view, offering spaces to reflect on the film canon, on avant-garde and experimental film, as well as supporting filmmaking practices through the incorporation of a methodological text that serves as preliminary notes for the making of a cinematographic piece.

The first of these essays contains a preface written by Gabriel Villota Toyos who explores the relationship between cinema and poetry through synesthesia and metaphor as depicted in the writings of Aristotle, Jacques Derrida, Adriano Aprà and Jorge

Urrutia. Discussing the debate between Pier Paolo Pasolini and Éric Rohmer on the distinctive meanings of the terms *cinéma-langue* and *cinéma-langage*, the text delves into questions related to the objective and subjective possibilities of the poem in its cinematographic application as well as semiotic concerns. The semiotic concerns are further developed in subsequent chapters of the publication, such as a contribution offered by the co-editor Santos Zunzunegui. Divided into two sections, the first examines the distinct definitions of poetry and the poetic function using Spanish language dictionaries as well as individual reflections by authors, placing special emphasis on the theories and writings of Roman Jakobson. The second section shifts the discourse purely to the cinematographic medium by focusing on the works of the Japanese filmmaker Ozu Yasujirō and the Iranian multidisciplinary artist Abbas Kiarostami. It defends their oeuvres as examples of an innate “cinema of the poetry,” distinguishing a number of characteristic elements such as repetitions, rhymes, parallelisms, metacinema, anagrammatic writing, or forms akin to the structure of the Iranian *josravaní*.

Written by Soliña Barreiro González, the central chapter of the publication pivots the conversation away from more dominant cinematographic forms and towards the avant-garde. Centred around a number of filmmakers within the Soviet, French and German avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, the essay dissects four distinctive topics: the influence of poetry in Surrealist cinema, particularly in Man Ray's films but also in the collaborative efforts of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí as well as Germaine Dulac and Antonin Artaud for their film *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (*La coquille et le clergyman*, 1928); the investigations surrounding the *photogénie* and its connection to the works of Jean Epstein; the *ostranenie* or defamiliarization and its move from literature to cinema in the writings and screenplays of Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum and Yuri Tynyanov, and films by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg; finally, the exchanges between cinema and poetry in the works of the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov and the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Moving across these four particular strands, Barreiro's journey effectively proves the existence of a dialogue between cinema and poetry in the 1920s European avant-garde.

The penultimate text of the collection continues the journey through the moving image but redirects the conversation from the 1920s avant-garde to the tradition of American experimental cinema and structural film. In his chapter, filmmaker and writer Alberte Pagán investigates the technical and formal possibilities

that connect cinema to poetry, both through the use of figures prevalent in the two disciplines, such as repetitions, loops or poetic narration, and with those exclusive of cinema's medium specificity, including fast and slow motion, superimpositions or via the film grain. Those elements, visible in the works of a number of filmmakers such as Ken Jacobs, Claudio Caldini, Maya Deren, Kurt Kren, Taka limura or Kenneth Anger, amongst others, show the inner relation between poetry and experimental cinema and how the latter moved beyond the use of purely poetic figures to construct its own poetic language.

Lastly, Jose Julián Bakedano and Germán Rodriguez make a discursive turn from theory to practice with a chapter that serves as a methodological essay prior to the making of a short film, merging poems from Juan Eduardo Cirlot's *Bronwyn* with appropriated film images from Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), Franklin J. Schaffner's *The War Lord* (1965) and Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (*Les yeux sans visage*, 1960). Although the essay falls short in its attempt to enhance the reader's understanding of the proposed work's complexity through the written word, it provides a good starting point for a discussion on the work's specific intentions, visual documents of the use of individual frames from the chosen films and poetic extracts from *Bronwyn*.

Ensayos de poética. Miradas sobre el contacto entre el cine y la poesía traces a comprehensive and concise journey through the history of cinema and its connection with poetry within its pages. The publication stands out for the diverse range of theories and cinematographic forms discussed, from canonical film directors to the Soviet, French and German avant-garde or experimental films, and for opening the conversation to film practitioners. The variety of contributions, that seem to confirm and demonstrate a substantial relationship between cinema and poetry, also opens up the possibility for future writings within some of the topics explored, allows for further research and a more in-depth survey. *Ensayos de poética*, which originated in a summer course in collaboration with the Universidad del País Vasco, also speaks to a need for courses dedicated to cinema in its various and diverse forms within academia, reclaiming the university as a site for promoting, learning and moving image making, not only relying on museums, galleries, festivals and cinematheques to carry out those essential tasks for both the present and the future of moving image scholarship and practice.

How to quote Bethencourt Reyes, Himar. 2020. "Oter, Jorge and Santos Zunzunegui. eds. 2019. *Ensayos de poética. Miradas sobre el contacto entre el cine y la poesía.*" *Comparative Cinema*, Vol. VIII, No. 14, p. 86-88.

- 5-7** Camil Ungureanu, Sonia Arribas & Rebecca Anne Peters
Imagining the Techno-Capitalist Society in Television and Film
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When Your Motherboard Replaces the Pearly Gates: *Black Mirror* and the Technology of Today and Tomorrow
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- 82-85** Ekin Erkan
Schefer, Jean-Louis. 2016. *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*.
- 86-88** Himar Bethencourt
Oter, Jorge and Santos Zunzunegui. eds. 2019. *Ensayos de poética. Miradas sobre el contacto entre el cine y la poesía*.