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A Matter of Affect: Digital Images and the Cybernetic Re-Wiring of Vision[1]

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It would be hard to deny that a digital aesthetics has infiltrated the mainstream of contemporary media culture. The 1990s witnessed the special effects bonanza of *Jurassic Park, Independence Day, Toy Story, Titanic, Twister,* and *Star Wars III*; the low-budget spooky atmospheres of *The Blair Witch Project;* and the exponential rise of the PC and video-games industry, with best-selling titles such as *Silent Hill, Resident Evil, Final Fantasy, Granturismo, Tombraider I, II, III, Simcity* and *Simlife*. In their big screen/small screen versions, these titles are the most visible expressions of a digital visual culture infecting the landscapes of control societies.[2]

In its various expressions, a digital media culture challenges the detachment that is necessary to the exercise of the sadistic, classifying gaze. Films that use digital effects overwhelm the spectator with their demand for a participation that is not so much about controlling as about being inundated by liquid images. Far from determining a relation between inside and outside, subject and object, digital effects tackle the mediatic interface between the body and the image. In Cronenberg's *Videodrome* the video screen is the retina of the mind's eye and the body is a recording machine: 'the more the images are flattened out and distanced from their representational sources, the more they are inscribed in our nerves, and flash across our synapses'.[3] There is a world of difference between the spectacular use of computerized simulation in the stampede scene of Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* and the moody feel of gothic videogames such as *Silent Hill* or *Resident Evil.* In the tradition of celluloid film, the former uses digital images to reinforce its masochistic passivization of the body through its assault on the senses of captive audiences. Video-games, on the other hand, exploit the claustrophobic enclaves of domestic spaces, such as living rooms and bedrooms, relying on the intimate loop between eyes, ears and hands to kidnap the players into virtual reality. Digital images bypass Oedipus, they do not need to recur to narratives of 'trauma, loss and death' in order to capture our bodies. In Brian Massumi's words, they convey the power of affect, rather than the reaction of subjective emotions.[4] This article is a theoretical effort to start conceptualizing the nature of digital images in contemporary media culture.

Analyses of the objectifying power of vision have been central to critical approaches to the question of identity and difference, in fields such as queer, postcolonial and

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race critical theory.[5] However, we would argue that it is within feminism that the relationship between bodies, images and reality has been most extensively discussed. An immediate point of reference for us is feminist film theory, where feminist critics have drawn on the resources of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis to examine the construction of sexual difference in dominant narrative cinema.[6] These theoretical resources have now come to preclude a more productive engagement with a digital aesthetics.

For example, in a recent essay in *Screen*, 'The cyberstar: digital pleasures and the end of the unconscious', Barbara Creed takes a long detour into the imminent world of cyberstars, synthespians and digital avatars, to wonder about the future of our visual culture. Confronted with the technical possibility of creating realistic-looking digital actors, Barbara Creed fears the consequences of the obsolescence of the Lacanian model of recognition and misrecognition of an Other. 'Will the spectator experience an excess of pleasure in identifying with the cyberstar, subjecting the image to her/his erotic look, or will the spectator feel removed or distanced from the image on the screen because he/she is aware that the figure is not human, that it is an image which dwells permanently in the imaginary, totally removed from the symbolic order of loss, trauma and death?'[7] The 'unreal' character of the digital image, its inhumanity which is the result of its autonomy from the real is particularly threatening for Lacanian-influenced understandings of psychic identity. Such an autonomy dissolves the dialectic between self and other and therefore threatens to neutralize difference, specifically corporeal difference. The erasure of difference is translated as a threat of disembodiment – very much a central concern of feminist approaches to digital technologies at large.[8]

For Creed, life outside the symbolic order can only leave us in a permanent 'imaginary' detached from reality, Baudrillard's 'desert of the real'.[9] The omnipresence of digital images seems to threaten our grasp and control of reality, and confirm what philosophers such as Plato and Descartes always knew: sight is deceptive, you cannot trust your two eyes. Within film theory, the opposition between 'realist' and 'modernist' visual techniques defines the principal question of what David N. Rodowick has called 'political modernism': 'Which aspects of film form promote identification (ideological practice) and which break identification (theoretical practice) and thus promote a critical awareness in the spectator?'[10] Theoretical practice, the critical awareness of the ideological meaning of images, can, from this perspective, emerge only in the 'awareness of a gap or distance between referent and sign in the image, between what the image represents and how it represents it'.[11] In their different genres and modalities, digital images seem to have a common denominator: their desire is to take over the real, to involve and overwhelm us to the point where we will no longer be able to discriminate between referent and sign.

In this context, we can understand the persistent seductive power of Jean Baudrillard's account of simulation, even for feminists. Even when Baudrillard is not directly used, his theories of simulation haunt us. From *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* to polemics about virtual communities, the shadow of Baudrillard and the tradition that he

resuscitates for the digital age have become real obstacles to our understandings of contemporary visual culture. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard argues that the shift from the world of the object, of the mirror and the scene, to the laboratory of miniaturization has transformed the pleasure of the gaze into an ecstasy of promiscuity. 'Ecstasy is all functions abolished into one dimension, the dimension of communication'.[12] For Baudrillard, the obscenity of the all-too-visible signals the end of the secret and its representation and the beginning of the era of hyper-reality, the absolute space of simulation. This ultimate call to a disappearing reality permeates popular perceptions of the power of technology and technological images.

Faced with the desert of the real, feminist theorists have rediscovered the Kantian solution: if the subject cannot comprehend the real according to an inherent logic, then all we can know is the categories that we use to understand it. Unlike Kant, however, much feminist theory rejects the transcendental subject in order to embrace a phenomenological approach. The only political force that can counteract simulation is that of an embodied feminist epistemology based on the phenomenological model of experience and subjectivity. The prosthetic vision of Donna Haraway's cyborg is the primary example of an attempt to integrate a phenomenological approach to experience with the technological and cultural fragmentation of a (feminist) identity. The phenomenological body, however, even in its cyborg update, *is:* it does not *become* in the virtuality of its encounters with other bodies. As Barbara Kennedy has recently put it, even for Haraway's cyborg 'there is no consideration of [...] the materiality of the body, or indeed what a body might mean'.[13] As such, a cyborg vision can only relate to images as an external reality that has then to be understood and conceptualized according to the categories of a fragmented, but already assumed, self. Phenomenology cannot help but reproduce a fixed subject that can only mediate, through the category of experience, between itself and a world that remains external to it. The dialectic of representation, therefore, is only complicated rather than being problematized in its very foundations. Before asking which body, we should ask: what is a body? Can a body be completely identified with a self, even a fragmented self? Is the self the only level at which political practice can be generated? Can an image be only a representation of reality that, in order to affect, needs first the mediation of identities?

The increasing prevalence of the digital image and a digital aesthetics challenges the dialectics of representation between self and other, reality and appearance. In our opinion, the cybernetic rewiring of vision in digital culture presents an intensification of the material qualities of the image. An engagement with the materiality of the image, we argue, should be part of a cybernetic feminism that is able to face up to the challenges of contemporary visual cultures.

However, it would be misleading to think of the material qualities of the image as a new phenomenon exclusively associated with the emergence of digital media, as if digitization constituted a mere technical innovation in the homogenous negative tradition of vision and its relation to the body.[14] As Andrew Darley has suggested, recent expressions of visual digital culture offer 'an instance of the historical

durability of certain ways of addressing the eyes and the senses'.[15] It is possible to refer to another history of images, vision and their relation to the body which is less concerned with central or subjective perspectives. Lucretius's simulacra, for example, affirm the sensible qualities of images, sounds, and smells.[16] Baruch Spinoza refers to images as compositions of 'anonymous particles' endowed with the power to affect.[17] Bergson's matter is defined as an 'aggregate of images', where a body is 'an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement', and therefore a centre of action that cannot give birth to a representation.[18] Walter Benjamin's work also expresses a preoccupation with the tactile qualities of photography and its capacity to capture images which escape natural vision;[19] and Luce Irigaray's asserts that the shadows on the Platonic cave are no reflections of a higher reality but the essence of matter itself.[20]

When seen without the mediation of questions of representation and reality, the field opens up to an understanding of the affective power of digital images, a power which is not exclusively conceptualized as the power to deceive or to subjectify the spectator. As Barbara Kennedy argues 'we need to rethink a post-semiotic space, a post-linguistic space, which provides new ways of understanding the scenic experience as a complex web of inter-relationalities. The look is never purely visual but also tactile, sensory, material [...] The eye in matter'.[21] We can then look at digital images not as deceptive, unreal simulations, threatening the embodied experience of the subject, but as affective media based on positive feedback, endowed with the power to impinge on the body by capturing its potential.

According to Brian Massumi, 'the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect:* it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. This is not to say that there is no connection and no logic. What is meant here by the content of the image is its indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its socio-linguistic qualification'.[22] Affect is not outside power, because it expresses relations of forces between bodies that can increase or decrease the power of a body. An affective approach to images requires a close understandings of the different layers through which a body operates *as an image among other images*.[23] Such relationship can be and is often organized through a dialectic of Self and Other, but such a dialectic captures only some of the levels through which bodies interact.[24]

There are other questions, then, that could be asked of a digital aesthetics, questions that address rather than bracket the affective relation between bodies and images. When looking at digital images, we could ask not merely: Where is the other? but What is their speed? Which parts of a body are they affecting? Which circuits of a body are they opening up and which ones are they closing down? What kind of connections are they establishing? What do you become when you play these games or watch these images? How persistent is their duration? What is their position in the cybernetic loops of the networked society? What is a woman in an affective space as compared to an emotional space? How can the relative autonomy of digital images from regimes of representation and identification help us to understand the position of women within cybernetic control?

Notes

[1] This essay was originally presented at the 3rd International *Crossroads in Cultural Studies* Conference (Birmingham, UK, 21-25 June 2000) with the title 'Affective Images: Video-games and the Cybernetic Re-wiring of Vision'.

[2] The term 'control societies' was introduced by Gilles Deleuze to describe a shift away from the disciplinary societies described by Michel Foucault. 'We're definitely moving toward 'control' societies that are no longer exactly disciplinary. Foucault's often taken as the theorist of disciplinary societies and of their principal technology, *confinement* (not just in hospital and prisons, but in schools, factories, and barracks). But he was actually one of the first to say that we're moving away from disciplinary societies, we've already left them behind. We're moving toward control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication', Gilles Deleuze 'Control and Becoming', trans. M. Joughin, in *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.174. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also refer to the society of control in their political analysis of contemporary modes of power, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000). On the subject see also Michael Hardt, 'The Withering of Civil Society', in Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller (eds), *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp.23–39.

[3] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp.138–139.

[4] Brian Massumi 'The Autonomy of Affect', in Paul Patton (ed.), *Deleuze: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp.217–239.

[5] For example, see Homi Bhabha 'The Other Question' in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.66–84; Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996); and Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar and John Greyson (eds) *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film on Video* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

[6] See Laura Mulvey's classic essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Anthony Easthope (ed.) *Contemporary Film Theory* (London: Longman, 1993); E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Jackie Stacey, 'Desperate Seeking Difference', in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (eds), *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), pp.112–129.

[7] Barbara Creed 'The Cyberstar: Digital Pleasures and the End of the Unconscious', *Screen*, 41(1), Spring 2000, p.85.

[8] See, for example, Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros* (London: Athlone, 1996); Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996); Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[9] See Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in Mark Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp.166–184. See also Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988).

[10] David N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (London, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.xv.

[11] Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, p. xvii. He also adds: 'The ghost of an idealist Hegelian identity theory – that is, the founding of epistemological judgments on the basis of the unity of subject and object – seems to permeate even the most emphatic attempts to promote a materialist film theory. And this is no less true for the appeals that the discourse of political modernism makes to psychoanalytic theory, especially Lacan' (p.208). Rodowick questions the notion that the subject is exclusively produced by the text, which unilaterally defines its formal unity.

[12] Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communiction*, p.24.

[13] Barbara M. Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.20.

[14] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993).

[15] Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.7.

[16] Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

[17] Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. E. Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[18] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p.19.

[19] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.211–244.

[20] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[21] Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema*, p.3.
[22] Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', p.218.
[23] See Deleuze's understanding of the image in Bergson, where image equals movement, that is a relation between bodies in movement: 'Every image is "merely a road by which pass, in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe". *Every image acts on others and reacts to others, on "all their facets at once" and "by all their elements"'* [Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (London: Athlone, 1986), p.58].
[24] Negri and Hardt suggest that the shift from what they call a modern sovereignty to the current imperial sovereignty implies a marginalization of the binary opposition between self and other in favour of an active interest in the management of difference. 'When we begin to consider the ideologies of corporate capital and the world market, it certainly appears that the postmodernist and postcolonialist theoriests who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignity have been outflanked by the strategies of power. Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference. These theorists thus find themselves pushing against an open door' [Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p.138]. The subtle and complex relation between cultural differences has become 'the very terrain upon which the global capitalist market operates' [Ashwani Sharma, 'Sounds Oriental: The (Im)possibility of Theorizing Asian Musical Cultures', in Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma (eds) *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), p.22]. On the production and management of difference within a 'turbulent' order also see Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova, 'Heat Death: emergence and control in genetic engineering and artificial life' in *Ctheory*, vol. 23, No. 1–2 (http://www.tao.ca/fire/ctheory/0119.html).

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