Spectators of Self-Deception: Defining Perception

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As an adolescent in the early 1990s who devoted himself to daily television like a monastic monk would religion, the workings of the rear projection television appeared obvious to me, except for one thing. *Happy Days*, that blissful 1970s replica of 1950s American life, appeared like another world, irrelevant to my upbringing in Australia. Sitting in the living room across the other side of the world, the show was characteristic for its simple hilarity of the American life of Richie Cunningham. Typical scenes staged the characters surrounded by an indistinct warm light, never depicting any of the dark hues or deep corners I knew to be true of the

greater reality of life. Scenes garnered with this hazy light made one automatically think each was fabricated on a flat set in the misty Californian sun (Figs. 1 & 2). Yet it wasn't necessarily the lighting or the color that left the images wanting. There was *something* lacking in the haze of fabricated Californian sunshine; there was *less* of something. Less detail, less shadow, less feeling. The scenes, lightened by the synthetic buoyancy of pastel colors, remained devoid of true darkness or uncertainty; a lack of depth that added to the unassuming merriment of the show.

A Way of Seeing

The television in our Australian living room was a rectangular box; four feet by four feet and as deep as the vanity table that held it. Typical of its time, the box was covered in a faux timber veneer and was punctured by a rounded grey glass screen. In retrospect, the screen's concave face and rounded corners gave it a bizarre three-dimensionality compared to contemporary televisions. The glass screen was in fact a truncated pyramid from whose apex, inside the television box, projected the images we dined on. The projections on the screen appeared flat but the surface itself had depth; the hollowness of the glass pyramid jarred my conception of flatness.

When the television was turned on, they were there: Fonzie, Richie Cunningham, and the rest,

illuminated in that bright haze on the surface of the screen. The graininess, the opaque quality, and the perennial streams of pastels all confined this replica of reality to a picture frame. The projections of *Happy Days* would transform the grey glass of the television into Debord's spectacle on a flat plate,[1]

which was devoured along with the family meal in front of us. Just as McLuhan[2] would inform me of later in life, *Happy Days* was the anesthetic to numb ourselves until bedtime, and we watched as the years passed, openly oblivious to how this projected world differed from our own in its detail. Like pigs in front of a feeding trough, the quality of this primitive technology mirrored the total permissiveness with which it was digested.

American analog television programs ran—for most of their broadcasting lives—on the NTSC sys-

tem of picture quality. The Australian system, PAL, produced broadcasts with 625 lines of resolution containing around 520 dots (pixels), compared to the NTSC's 525 lines. The amount of lines represented the point at which the television signals were restricted due to the original monochromatic

broadcasting system. Higher resolution meant images were divided into more lines, reducing the contrast between neighboring lines and producing a clearer image. Compared to the Australian projections, *Happy Days*' graininess and pastel opaqueness was a reduction of information. This reduction was itself nothing to be ashamed of; America chose an inferior system of visual quality before Australia, and this became its limiting factor. The finitude of the *Happy Days*' images had been set by the technological bounds in which they were created, adding to this perfect medium of en-

Figs. 1 & 2: Two images of the Happy Days crew. One interior and one exterior; seemingly both have a muted color range and haziness, eschewing anything imperceptible.

tertainment pleasantly embraced by our indifferent family. As the name suggested, such scenes and stories provided nothing but “happy days;” a lack of depth and darkness seemingly part of its overall easy viewing.

Yet most of the time, the surface of the television would sit there, dead to the world, waiting to be turned on (Fig. 3). The surface of the screen would reflect the room with a dullish hue and augment its reflection into a monochromatic cosmos of expanded space, irrelevant of how lively the living room was. The large green crocodile birthday cakes, the Celtic family pewter clock, the beautiful Yves Klein Blue dresses, and the colorful sports uniforms of family life all appeared as greyish apparitions. These obscure images, formed in the reflections on the screen when off, would impart a sense of uneasiness in comparison to the flatness of the hazy illuminated images of *Happy Days*. Being off, the television’s ability to petrify the world willed you to turn it on, destroying any impression of the uncanny. In this unelectrified state, the surface of the television was an object of chance and superstition. It was neither the rational physical construction of machinery, nor the sound purveyor of images of our desires that the television had symbolized. It was rather a material object that would forever misconstrue space through incomprehensible proportions, introducing an indistinguishable unknown quality in the living room.

Fig. 3: Unelectrified television in the corner of a room. The bulbous grey glass surface protruding from the veneered box.

Blurring the surety one had of the world, the surface of the television produced within its reflective grayish surface the presence of the unknown, the unsure, and the imperceptible. This surface was the inanimate muse much like the impressionists’ Claude Mirror. Used by Manet and Matisse for its specific mode of vision, such screens emphasized sensation itself over objects of sensation. The subjects of the mirror would travel great distances

to incredible sceneries, only to turn their backs on the world in order to view it reflected in the palm of their hand. The Claude Mirror, as a form of technology, enhanced the possibility of the unknown and utilized it for discovery. In contrast to its electrified self whose projection formalized uncertainty via a lack of information, the grey television surface was an analog experience of reflection, opening up and expanding the world beyond its visual conception.

A Way of Hiding

Sitting in front of my plasma television in the 2000s, with six times the definition of earlier apparatuses and 1080 lines of resolution at 1920 pixels per line, the surface itself was now fashioning the images it projected. With the DVD spinning at 1000 rotations per minute and the DVD player's laser reading the disk's individual bumps spaced at 740 nanometers apart (1/1,000,000 of a meter), the world of Hogwarts and Harry Potter was illuminated. The religious consumption of television still took place within a rectangular frame, two meters in front of me, yet my trough had evolved, along with the feed. The rear projection television had been replaced by a field of two million individual pixels, forming a new generation of images to temper both imagination and insecurities.
As Albus Dumbledore cast an enquiring glance into the surface of the ethereal *pensieve*[3] from the television (Fig. 4), my family pewter clock appeared

in full luster. Both objects presented themselves as two of the same; one immaterial and one material. The clock's surface flowed with variations formed into its ultra-reflective pewter, while the *pensieve* undulated as a surface of reflective memories. Moving like waves within the bounds of a frame,

Fig. 4: Albus Dumbledore casts an inquiring glance at the magic flowing surface of memory, the pensieve, in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005).

the *pensieve* tantalized the scene with flicks and flecks of light. This flowing amorphous surface presented other realms from which moments could be imparted onto its surface. Even though it was fictional, the *pensieve* was emblematic of many other surfaces of magic and superstition used to initiate another form of reality.

Like this magic portal, the variations covering the polished pewter clock would cause a reflective iridescence. The clock reflected no detail, only swathes of distorted color and movement from the midday sunlight landing directly on its surface. The highly-polished pewter had done away with Brunelleschi's perspective, instead reflecting the

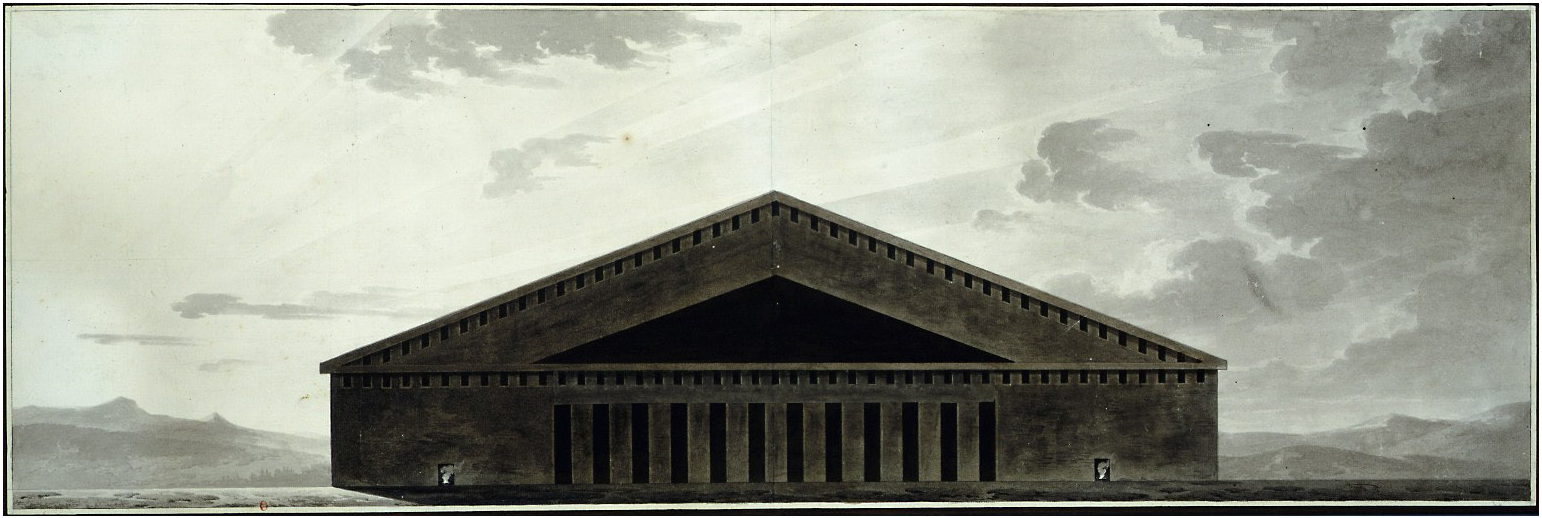

Fig. 5: Étienne-Louis Boulleé's Temple of Death, 1790.

couch and carpet as undulations. It was a cacophony of light fragments, distortions of shapes, and flashes of movement within an otherwise abnormally still living room.

The surfaces of the clock and the *pensieve* present the magical hold of obscurity, and my unconscious insecurity of their reflections represents a mixture of memory and fear. The resulting lack of distinction from these surfaces between subject and space exhibits Minkowski's idea of dark space; not simply the absence of light, but something that forever penetrates us and distorts our own representation of ourselves in space, forcing the sensory organs to play a modest role in spatial recognition.[4] The objects' sparks of light and glints of color were emblematic of the unknown, enveloping egos and causing disquiet within. If Vidler proposed such a space could be held within Étienne-Louis Boulleé's etched Temple of Death (Fig. 5), these objects were proof of it in a formal capacity. Where Vidler saw the Temple of Death's infinitely thin etching as dissolving "the bodily substantiality of the traditional monument [...] into a mirror of the projection of a disappearing subject,"[5] these indistinguishable objects removed the certitude of the subject's presence altogether, distorting any concept of the finality of the space around them.

While these surfaces had reflected the evidence of the unknown, a symbol of a horseshoe upon the pewter clock presented a different form of uncertainty. A hopeful grasp at something indiscernible, the horseshoe that had once stood for the power and strength of iron now lay forlorn as part of the remnants of a faith in the unknown, the imperceptible, or simply chance; superstition. A faith not placed within a firm belief of rational knowledge, superstition was a tangible unknown that permitted a collective to exist in the world via a containment of incomprehensible and insurmountable information. Magic or the supernatural were constructed forms within which the unknown—things of the world that could not be explained—were framed. Unlike the surfaces of the television or the pewter clock, the comprehension of the strange, alien, and dark space was assisted by this collective faith in an object or symbol; here in the form of a horseshoe. The concealment of an unknown by its frame rendered null and void the necessity to confront the insecurities and fears held within it.

Much like the magic of Dumbledore's *pensieve*, to us wee muggles superstitions are incomprehensible, the intelligence behind their objects relying on an esoteric knowledge. Dumbledore is a magician; a horseshoe's luck is foretold in folk tales. Both establish a division between those who know and those who don't know. Magic, or the unknown, can be taken as that which only a few people can explain or comprehend; maintaining power through

segregation. The muggles and the magicians, or the superstitious and those who manipulate them, are here contextualized as a hierarchy of power under the guise of surfaces; immaterial or material, their framing provides a partitioning of knowledge that results in exclusion.

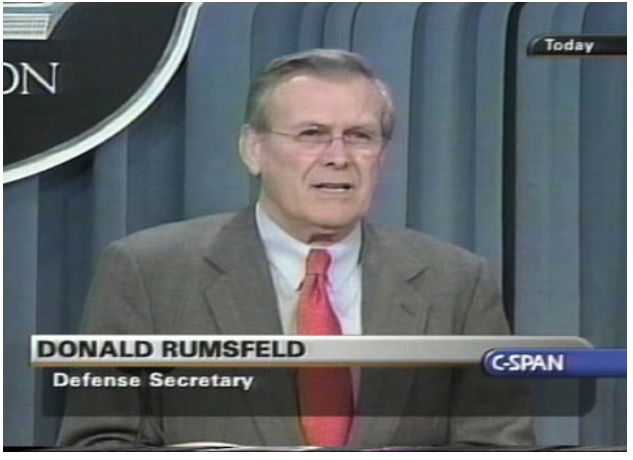

Fig. 6: The man of the unknown. Donald Rumsfeld giving a press conference to the media about the Iraq war and the lack of information in regards to weapons of mass destruction, 2002.

A Way of Segregating

However, even before the magic of Hogwarts in the early 2000s, the power of the unknown had already been revealed on our screens. The unknown intelligence that the governing bodies of the western world withheld was already accepted by the public; we muggles had every idea we were muggles yet didn't care. The old wizard himself, Donald Rumsfeld (Fig. 6), epitomized this position in 2002 when

my plasma was still new. His depiction of the situation in Iraq was summarized by this statement:

> *There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.*[6]

Confirming the existence specifically of known unknowns, he acknowledged that the unknown was a symbol of the segregation of power. Like the surface or superstitious symbol, known unknowns were a comprehensible framework that contextualized, controlled, and concealed the mystery of the unknown, focusing our conception of it on its context and not its content.

Yet as Slavoj Žižek points out, Donald had forgotten to explain the final portion of the relationship between known and unknown; the unknown known. The "disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values."[7] To Žižek, the unknown knowns were the practices of torture that the Bush administration deemed un-American, yet whose continuation of such practices indeed deemed them to be accepted as an embodiment of American values through their denial.

Fig. 7: An image of the earth taken from Apollo 17 on December 7, 1972. This was the first time the earth had been fully shot through photography, providing a solitary and potentially (at the time) unifying image of the world.

While Rumsfeld's statement didn't mark a clear shift in the way we gathered information, it did highlight the clear deceit with which we received it. Irrelevant of our new-found inhalation of information, disinformation brought only the same continued indifference; technology had progressed, but our system of belief was still a form of anesthetic to get us to bedtime. The unknowns of the world were held back from our consciousness by our complete deferral of governance, and with this we were collectively content.

A Way of Containing

My new faith is now held in the portable flat screen. 200 years after the Claude Mirror reflected Manet's gaze, the screen is the perfect reflection of my exteriority; a beautiful wafer-thin film of my continued religion and existence. My trough now overflows with feed that I view on my wristwatch or phone, and with online maps and satellite imagery the whole world is bounded within each surface. Unlike *The Blue Marble* (Fig. 7) image from Apollo 17 that provided one solitary representation of the world and its people, the new landscape and terrain of Google Maps represents our modern world full of detail, in high-definition, and relative to everything. Accessible and complete, every extent of the earth is scalable and comparable to every other street, mountain, or building.

Yet, when viewing the area around the Volkel Air Base, Netherlands on Google Maps in 2016, (Fig. 8) it becomes evident that the concealment of information still exists. Framed outlines of pixelated formulations cover this Dutch airstrip, while the picture-perfect aerial photography of the landscape around remains. These blurred out areas are found all over Google's representation of the world. Within dynamic surfaces of remote forests, deserts, and mountain ranges, hide missile bases, nuclear sites, and other zones under cloaks of deliberate distortions. Sitting within a finite frame

in the middle of your screen, they appear as regions cut out with Photoshop. Made up of pixels, these pieces of *known unknowns* are what we accept as the segregation of power in our society, underlining our continued self-deception and highlighting that our neo-liberal values are now projected back to us on our surfaces.

Fig. 8: A 2016 image from Google Maps showing the pixelated air base in the Netherlands; the eponymous image that the access to space is just as important as knowing of its existence.

Looking now at my "retina display" MacBook with more than 300 pixels per square inch, my eyes can no longer perceive the individual pixels within my feeding trough. The new surface of the unknown is not that which cannot be perceived, but that which can be contained; a reminder that to conquer space one must have access to it. The problem now lies with a paradoxical anti-revolution; the segregation

of power remains even after technology has offered a way forward. Just like the reflective qualities of the clock, darkness, or concepts of the supernatural, the *unknown* still scares us; but we have chosen its containment through one of the things that originally hid it, screens. The happy television of my youth has been killed off, but the indifference remains; the finite and comprehensible are forever more preferable.

Watching an episode of *Happy Days* now, the surface of pixels recreates the original lack of resolution; a pixelated revivalism that honors the original reduction of information that concealed the depths of the unknown. The fidelity to an idealized version of the 1950s created in the 1970s is now retained in the 2010s. These surfaces that contain our *known unknowns* and *unknown knowns*—mobile phones, computers, and televisions—do not conceal anything, they simply segregate. They emphasize our total acquiescence and detachment from murky waters that were once attributed to a lack of technology, but are now found in our abundance of it. The progression to super high resolution has only increased the scope of our own deception and is now so complex that denial appears as the only viable answer.

Notes

[1] As Debord notes, "[t]he externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." As the primary mode of entertainment in houses across the world for sixty years, the television embodies Debord's concept of the spectacle. Here understood as the flat layer upon which the accumulation of images of society are projected, the television screen manifests our resignation to the spectacle. As Debord goes on, "[t]he spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep." Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), 21, 30.

[2] To Marshall McLuhan, television was a cool medium, something that engendered ritual, rhythm, and pattern. The people that watched it would "lose interest in being private individuals [… as a a result of] one of the hidden and perhaps insidious effects of television;"—Marshall McLuhan, "What Television Does Best," Marshall McLuhan Speaks, interview with Tom Snyder, The National Broadcasting Corporation (1976); accessed November 09, 2017, http://www.marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/interview/1976-what-television-does-best.

[3] The *pensieve* is a fictional object from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series; it is used to review a person's memories by pouring vials of liquid into its shallow pool of substance that resembles liquid gas.

[4] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (The MIT Press: 1992), 175. Vidler is quoting from Roger Caillois "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," translated by John Shepley, in October: The First Decade, 1976-1986, edited by Annette Michelson, Rosalind Kraus, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987), 70. Caillois is quoting from Eugene Minkowski, "Le temps vécu," *Etudes phénoménologiques et psychopathologiques* (Paris, 1933), 382-398.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Donald Rumsfeld, *Known Unknown*: A Memoir (New York: Sentinel, 2011).

[7] Slavoj Žižek, "What Rumsfled Doesn't Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib" in *In These Times*, May 21 2004.