The Post-Screen Through Virtual Reality, Holograms and Light Projections

Ng, Jenna

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Ng, Jenna.

Amsterdam University Press, 2021.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/98226.

For additional information about this book https://muse.jhu.edu/book/98226
Conclusion/Coda

Abstract
This Conclusion/Coda summarizes the book’s key argument: the post-screen as a visual phenomenon which, through contemporary instantiations via Virtual Reality, holographic and light projections, blurs boundaries between virtuality and actuality, and re-formulates conditions of media, reality, death, life, matter and history. The Conclusion also points the post-screen towards two further ideas which drive its concept: difference, in terms of screen boundaries demarcating image against surroundings, and on difference without positive terms; and gluttony of visual media, specifically in relation to play between the real and the unreal. Both ideas not only serve the diminished boundaries of the post-screen in terms of the book’s analyses, but also render the post-screen a framework for today’s politics of post-truth, misinformation and deepfakes as a moment of media history. Finally, the Conclusion extends the post-screen to the (as of writing) current Covid-19 pandemic as a mirror of the internalization that is of both post-screen media and virus – both are in us, and inescapable.

Keywords: screen; media history; difference; gluttony; Covid-19; intern

Postscripts to the Post-Screen: The Holiday and the Global Pandemic

Vignette 1

In the midst of finishing this book, I took a week-long family holiday to Dubai in late January 2020. Taking our place in the crush of tourists, we visited the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world at 829.8 metres from ground to tip, by taking the elevator – whose trip alone took three minutes – to its 124th floor observatory deck at 450 meters towards the sky. The deck was an enclosed circular floor covered in wall-to-ceiling glass windows, so that one could walk an orbit to take in a 360-degree view of
the city. The ghosts of the nineteenth-century panorama whispered in my ear as I strolled slowly along the circular deck, gazing out at my own twenty-first century panorama, tracing steps in the same kind of round tour as nineteenth-century Londoners did with my panorama’s visual forebear, wide-eyed with the same kind of wonder.

At that height, the famous skyscraper-replete vista of the city of Dubai, boasting twelve of the world’s tallest seventy buildings, looked like geometrical saplings. In the distance, the Arabian Desert stretched away into dusty and dusky shimmers. With a constitution happily unaffected by vertigo, I stepped right up to each window pane, gazing out at the view as if at a panel of a continuous panorama painting. At that elevation and across the totalizing glass pane, my visual reference to the scene before me was not only godlike, but, to all intents and purposes, virtualized. The view at that height had no spatial or dimensional relation to its reality on the ground – a reality I had only half an hour ago observed and photographed from the tourist bus at ground level before boarding the elevator – other than its vast vertical distance from it. In this respect, too, the Victorian viewer could only relate to the locales and depictions of the nineteenth-century panorama by their foreignness and distance from the actual sites of catastrophe and heat of battles. It was at this point that I realized I was viewing not out of an observation deck, but at a screen. Born in Asia, living in Europe, I had come to this point mid-way between the two continents and gotten myself onto the observation deck of the tallest building in the world to look at a screen.

Yet, as I continued to move from pane to pane, border to border, I realized there was something else in the alien-ness of that view, namely, that even while I was gazing out onto something which contained its own order of reality, at the same time it constituted my actuality. And this was the difference: where the notion of the screen had always been linked to ideas of spectacle and spectatorship – and therefore to questions of representation – here was a different experience. This was no painting with concealed boundaries; there was neither illusion nor trick of light. Rather, this was an image commandeered through a bodily experience of the visual and the affective which could only make sense of this visual data as an unreal reality. This was not an image in the sense of that which tried to capture what is out there; this was an image that was in me. This was not a screen; this was the post-screen.

Vignette 2

I returned to the UK in early February 2020. A month later, the SARS-CoV-2 virus swept through Europe as Covid-19 cases started soaring in Italy. Within weeks of my return, the UK entered a national lockdown on March 26, 2020 that was to end up lasting, in one variation or another, 432 days (and still continuing as of writing). For at least the next seven weeks, we lived almost entirely through onscreen realities as people worked from home and all visits to others outside one's household were banned. Virtually all manner of human interaction, from work meetings to blind dates to Parliamentary sessions, were conducted on Zoom (or Microsoft Teams or Google Meet), and friends and family Skyped to stay in touch, or waved to each other across window panes. The screen, always having been ubiquitous and ambient, even wearable, now asserted its presence in our lives with a new, almost violent forcefulness. Its boundaries became a suddenly cruel clarion call of the vast and imposing distances between the virtual realities of the screen, with its semblances of human warmth and interaction against the actual realities of isolation and confinement in daily lives under lockdown.

The status of the screen in life under Covid-19 conditions, then, heralded an unexpected postscript to the post-screen. The original post-screen, as this book has argued, was to be the state of our visual world as compelled via various contemporary media technologies, and through which images and reality present themselves, blurring critically important boundaries between virtuality and actuality, art and life. In wider terms, the post-screen re-formulates statements of contemporary conditions of media, reality, death, life, matter and history. The heady view from the heights of the Burj Khalifa observatory deck, just before Covid-19 became its own reality, sealed to me the pinnacle of that post-screen: a view of a reality unfettered by boundaries not merely in terms of the floor-to-wall glass windows but, more importantly, by its state of actuality apprehended as so unreal it was, in its essence, an internal virtualization. The post-screen thus signalled a visual regime whose boundaries of reference were so truly deliquesced it compelled the conceptualization of a successor to the screen as our most dominant and ubiquitous visual framework today: hence, the post-screen.

---

However, mere weeks after, the world in the grips of the pandemic was swept into Covid-19 lockdown realities of virtualized meetings and ubiquitous communication through screens of computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones. Their screen boundaries were not only of realities between the virtual and the actual, but also between isolation and companionship, silence and speech. In that sense, the pandemic demonstrated, and continues to do so, a gulf across boundaries of immense distance, cruel and stark.

Yet, in another sense – and of the same kind of paradoxes which have coloured this book – the Covid-19 pandemic is also of the post-screen: like the image of the post-screen that is in us, so is the virus. As does the post-screen eliminate boundaries between the actual and the virtual, so does the virus carry across borders and bodies. Screens may have been everywhere during lockdowns across the world, but, per their boundaries against the actual and the virtual, were neither protections nor defences against the viral threat. The status of the screen under Covid-19 conditions, then, turns out to be the more radical post-script to the post-script, whereby the virus itself is not of the screens to which life under Covid-19 retreated; it is actually of the post-screen. As with the image of the post-screen, the virus spills across boundaries and renders the same paradoxes of danger and protection in its wake, such as those of our bodies’ vulnerability and immunity. What started as an idea of a contemporary visual world thus also became a conceptual anchor of the current pandemic world. Both worlds are inescapable.

***

Twin Obsessions (1): Difference

Two obsessions drive this book. The first is with difference – that quality of limbo which relies on relation, existing not as a thing but as against something. In that respect, difference is inherent in representation, whose being, by definition, is necessarily of one as against its object. The well-known Saussurean idea of "differences without positive terms" also comes to mind here,3 whereby difference itself is not about the sign but about those that surround it. The task of the theorist, then – and certainly of this theorist via this particular obsession – is to be clear about difference without positive terms.

---

Yet, even as difference exists to mark one against the other, the counter-drive emerges to eliminate it. In this, the language for the visual already contains its own twist, where “representation” ruptures itself both with punctuation and in pronunciation as “re-presentation.” André Bazin foresaw this outcome in relation to cinema (and its brand of realism as its aesthetic) as a regime of representation, where his reading of the medium as a “perfect aesthetic illusion of reality” engendered his prophetic vision of “no more cinema.” In that sense, to Bazin and the theorists of cinematic realism, cinema – as technological innovation, but also as the ushering of a new level of representation by the moving image and its capture of reality – heralded the effective extinguishing of their difference. Moreover, the seam between image and reality becomes increasingly invisible with technological advancement, as Serge Daney, paraphrasing Bazin, puts it: “I know (that the image is not real) but all the same... With each technical change, the transparency grows, the difference seems to get smaller; the celluloid becomes the skin of History and the screen a window open to the world.” (emphasis added)

As with Baudrillard (if in the more complex context of simulacra), Daney cautions against the perfect seam:

We should not split up the screen but show the split occurring on it... not break continuity but make a rupture stand out on the conveyor belt of presence... To intern difference [taking from Derrida’s phrase of sublimation, or idealization, by “interning difference in self-preservation”] means saving representation [emphasis and quotes in square brackets both in original].

But what does saving representation mean? And, in turn, what is at stake in difference? Or, perhaps, the question might be: what is representation for? As with storytelling, representation belies deep and ancient drives – the cave drawings, tens of thousands years old, of Lascaux, Chauvet, Altamira, Bhimbetka, Laas Gaal and, most recently, in South Sulawesi stand alongside...
oral myths, performance rituals, lore and legends. To represent in image or story is to make the most primitive sense of world and life, such as allegorizing dangers and threats into monsters to be slain. Representation is also an existential documentation of our presence – a pushback against death, decay and the grinding of long and deep time, where even bones turn to dust. It is an expression of the most primordial kind – to see and hear oneself as an externality in order to affirm the shortest of all possible grammatical linguistic utterances: we are; or, I am. To save representation, then, is also to conserve these expressions in and of the image so intimately bound up with identity, being and selfhood. Difference is not about disagreement but confirmation; it is an affirmation of our realities against what they are not.

But media technologies constantly push against these boundaries of image against reality, so that representation itself is thus also driven by twin obsessions, one extended from the other – to create; and then to create entirely. These two obsessions stretch as broad vectors across the history of visual representation from painting to magic lanterns to panoramas to photography to cinema to holograms to virtual reality and so on – not only to construct a real external reality in image and sound, but also to eliminate their boundaries of difference with the actual real. The desire at stake is the compulsion that drives every creator – to devise and commandeer an order of reality that is theirs, to engender not only the conditions of the present but also its history and memories. It is, perhaps, the ultimate gesture to the renewal myth writ large: the begetting of new beginnings, the rebirth of the prelapsarian, the return of innocence and wholeness.

As it turned out, cinematic representation, with its cumbersome apparatus and eventual baggage of editing, narrative, composition, sound and so on, was not quite the perfect illusion as envisioned by Bazin. As cinema institutionalized, its screens lapsed into industry standards and models which fossilized expectations of the site of the image – the multiplex, the art house theatre, the drive-in with its big outdoor projector screen, and so on. In becoming a set audiovisual system, cinema established its language, institutional norms and social practices; its regime of representation correspondingly became tamed, familiar, bloodless. The image that used to be so big became small, not in its literal dimensions (though much of that has happened, too, with the advent of multiplex screens, and then with sites of consumption of films shifting to domestic screens and then mobile screens), but diminished in what it could say, in itself, about images as against object, about the virtual in relation to the actual, and about what representation as a semiotic system can mean as an understanding of understanding.
Instead, as I have shown in this book, other kinds of representational media systems have emerged as the more telling formulations of our states of realities and histories today, formulations which I have thus encapsulated as the post-screen. Three of these media technologies in this regard form the corpus for this book: virtual reality (VR); holographic projections; and light projections. They are by no means new phenomena, as painstaking research into their media histories demonstrates critical trajectories from various precedents and predecessors, and highlights the important nuances of understanding the “newness” of new media.

However, that line of scholarship is concerned with, so to speak, media’s assemblage – in the Deleuzian and Guattarian sense – in terms of media's forms of content and expression. What I have argued through this book, rather, per this first obsession with difference, is the shifting of the theoretical lens from the newness of media in relation to form to its increasing lack of discernment of difference – per its diminishing boundaries – and, in turn, what that might mean as a critical statement of today’s conditions of truth, reality and, in turn, today’s politics of mediated truth and reality. On its ontology of difference, representation has always balanced, in long lines of theoretical and philosophical thought, affirmation and challenge against reality, be that iconic likeness as in portraiture, or the existential imprint of light in photography and film for its evidentiary properties of documentation and truth, or the challenges thereof. At the turn of the millennia, computer graphics imagery (CGI) upended these relatively established grounds of truth and reality as photorealistic images with no connection to their referents flooded screen and print media. The re-questioning of truth and reality from representation reverberated across the photoshopping of celebrities’ bodies to the computer-generated fireworks shown in the live broadcast

8 Deleuze and Guattari first refer to the term “assemblage” in their text, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), where, in their analyses of assemblages in Kafka’s literature, Deleuze and Guattari state that “an assemblage...has two sides: it is a collective assemblage of enunciation; it is a machinic assemblage of desire,” 81. Subsequently, they re-affirm their ideas of the formalization of assemblage as a constitution of form of content (via bodies) and form of expression (via acts and statements) in their 1980 work originally in French, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): “[A]n assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand, it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies [emphasis in original],” 88.
of the 2008 Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, passing off as a filmed record of the actual event.9

On one level, then, today’s manifestations of VR, holograms and light projections thus continue as the latest evolving statements of those contestations between image, representation, truth and reality. Yet it is more than even that: in light of today’s indisputable ubiquity of screen media, the combination of their pervasiveness with their ensuing subversions of difference might also present an amplified statement of where and how we and our times stand today in terms of media history (cf the history of media, the distinction of which was also discussed in the introduction and chapter 5) — as in, the modes of media and mediation through which we live the times in which we exist and that which lives through us in the times in which we exist. History today is thus not simply that which we live through or the tracing of accounts of events; it is also a media history, whereby media – images, utterances, sound, screens, the Internet, social forums etc – becomes the sense-maker of the politics, policies, history, power, law and events which turn the billions of axles through which human and non-human lives grind and pass, and collectives formed and shaped.

In this respect, the manifestation of the post-screen today, then, also constitutes one such moment of media history, a moment I have chosen to identify as the twenty-first century ruling political climate, certainly in the Anglo-US context, through which runs a current – or more like an enveloping toxic cloud – of constantly shifting, essentially unreal, almost apparitional basis of truth and values. The Information Age, once heralded as a new dawn for human society, crowned by the Third Wave from the 1980s that swept in the post-industrial society,10 and crested with the heady liberations of mainstream Internet in the 1990s, is now indisputably corrupted into The Misinformation Age,11 with fake news and post-truths deftly and ably developed into a whole alternative system of non-values. The issue is not so much about the existence of lies and falsehood (though there is certainly no shortage of those in our politics today), but the non-existent grounds for their existence.

Hence, media, as systems of representation – and as harbingers of difference between real and unreal, actual and virtual, art and life – connects

also to history; hence, post-screen media, as eliminators of such difference, itself connects to current histories. Where media is, as it has always been, the systems which push and interrogate how we sense and apprehend, and, in turn, establish the terms on which we receive information, truths and values, they also become the core of the corruption of those information, truths and values – the misinformation, disinformation, mistruths and untruths which colour contemporary times. In other words, our terms of information changed as media itself changed and, \textit{qua} the post-screen, changed \textit{in terms of how it sets, establishes, guards and polices the boundaries of difference.} It is a subtle, multi-faceted and not entirely perceptible process, though I have tried to give an account here of its gradual shades and incremental degrees of change as anchored to the concept of the post-screen. In this account, first across chapters 1 and 2 via the institutional representational system of cinema as a primary exemplar, the winds for the emergence of the post-screen first shifted in how screen boundaries were already moving and porous from the early days of cinema in terms of revelation and concealment, protection and defence; the virtual already leaking into the actual. In turn, the shift gathers apace in the bordering of our representational systems via VR, holographic projections, true holograms and light projections which enable us to re-think key ideas of meaning across ontology, death and matter: the placements of actual and virtual reality in the totalization of virtual environments (chapter 3); the conceptualizations of afterlife, after-life, ghosts and apparitions (chapter 4); the transformations of matter under light as against the material and the inmaterial, mass and dematerialization (chapter 5).

The elimination of difference in the post-screen thus shifts not only our thinking of key ideas, but also the ground beneath their feet. At this point, we may also re-visit Daney’s provocation, as quoted earlier: “to intern difference means saving representation.” \textit{To intern}, then, takes on different kinds of meanings: in the context of his essay, Daney most likely refers to the sense of confinement, as in to intern a prisoner; hence, to capture or delimit difference to show the split on the screen.

However, \textit{to intern} may also refer to internalization, or to render internal. In turn, this tension in the ambiguity of definitions points precisely to the problematics of the change from the screen to the post-screen, which itself signals a shift \textit{from confinement to internalization}. Where the image onscreen had always been on the outside (as in, outside of the spectator) to be captured (\textit{to save representation}), the post-screen erases the difference between spectator and actor, so that action, spectating and image all become internalized unto the spectator themselves. The extinguishment of
difference thus becomes the assertion of a new kind of virtuality, one that is neither a second order of the actual nor even simulacra in terms of its distance from the originating referent, but a virtuality that is internalized—that meshes with, dissolves or folds into the actual to create different kinds of ghosts. As with the view from the observatory level of the Burj Khalifa, the unreal actuality is also the real virtuality—such is the paradox of the post-screen, and illustrated here by way of a personalized instantiation. But, as with the viral pathogen of SARS-CoV-2, the post-screen is also an internal entity—it is in us. Covid-19, as the most critical analogue to the post-screen, and the real-ness of its system of contagion, borderless across bodies, thus progresses difference in this sense to become something that is more than a lack of the discernment of difference—it is also about the internalization of difference, and the implications thereof. As much as the post-screen is of media technology, it is also of another notion of history, epitomized here in a timely convergence via Covid-19 as pathogen, disease, pain and violence, for which there is no immunity, just as screens are not in themselves any kind of protection. In turn, that points to the issue of media today as one not of representation, but internalization. There is no full circle of, for instance, VR from the panorama in terms of the extinguishment of difference; what we now face (and are hit with) is a mediascape against which, like the viral contagion of our present, there is no escape—because it is internalized. On that same logic, what we thus also have today is not just the contestation of the real against illusion or the unreal, but the disappearance of difference without positive terms as a moment of media history—the history of uncertain values and a ground pulled from our feet, in which we are still currently interned and internalizing.

The post-screen thus engenders for reality not only no more cinema, but also no more media in terms of history: we may now think of everything as cinema, or as image, or as virtuality. But the thinking is not in the sense of “no more cinema” as Bazin had meant it, whereby he flipped the illusion of reality to reality itself in cinema’s borderless zone of the unreal against the real. Rather, our conclusion today is that the terms of reality and illusion no longer have their old semantic values as they did when shot across the screen’s boundaries; they are no longer related in the ways they used to be related. In the post-screen, reality and illusion are not counters or opposites to each other. Where the difference without positive terms has disappeared in the internalization of the image is also the emergence not of another reality but another regime of truth values that has returned on the far side of media history. But this is no return of, say, the prelapsarian, which only speaks of a nostalgic return; this is a return of another notion of history
out of a profound internalization of the shit storms, the dis/misinformation and the post-truth of current politics – a return of the positive in the most scurrilous and outrageous of styles.

This conclusion thus also answers the “why now” question currently so faddish in academia in justifying its enquiries: why now in writing this book, why now for this argument? The answer, if one is at all needed: because we are in a regime today where, to put it succinctly, truth is lost. This is not to say that truth is not around or not in its place and we are in search of it, as in “I have lost my keys,” or even as in Proust’s seeking of memory à la temps perdu. Rather, truth is lost in the sense that it is disoriented, adrift and constantly unsettled in being fudged and muddied against half-truths, speculative facts, exaggerations, omissions, out of context information, misstatements and outright falsehoods, all merging into the kind of virtuality – part simulacra, part virtual, part actual – which drives our realities today. How, then, to make sense of this virtualized reality sur les stéroïdes anabolisants – not in terms of discerning the truth, but in simply grasping the shape and state of this discombobulation?

Media, as the representation system par excellence of our realities, thus becomes an obvious candidate of tool. In turn, the post-screen, as a devised concept in thinking through these critical boundaries, becomes a mental map to trace these precarious and volatile grounds today of information, knowledge and knowing. The re-thinking of representation and re-presentation, replacements and re-placements, ghosts and spectrality, virtual and actual, materiality and immateriality is thus enmeshed not only with the currencies of media technologies, but the wider question of how we understand and engage with our values, truths and information. Where media is ubiquitous and screens are omnipresent, something is also happening to their boundaries. Where screens meld into air, buildings, bodies, and where images fold down into their surroundings – as difference vanishes into us – something is also happening to our apprehensions of truth and falsehood, and the difference between them. The post-screen is thus also a mental model for signalling this disappearance of difference, if one not quite as with simulacra. It is a different kind of vanishing – a dis-appearance that is constructing, even as I write, this moment of media history.

Twin Obsessions (2): The Gluttony

The second obsession, then, is with gluttony, or, perhaps more precisely, with the mindless devouring and consumption that comes out of not only
an unsated but unnamed hunger. Such craving in the culture is not new to the millennia, albeit perhaps different to each era. We might recall here Slavoj Žižek’s description, taking from Alain Badiou’s “passion for the Real [la passion du reel],” of a drive in the twentieth century for “the thing itself,” or a (Lacanian) Real that comes from the bare-knuckled face of violent and direct transgression:

In contrast to the nineteenth century of utopian or ‘scientific’ projects and ideals, plans for the future, the twentieth century aimed at delivering the thing itself... The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality [emphasis added.] 12

Now well into the millennia, we might be able to think of this desire for the real – in its Fight-Club-esque exposure of harshness, intensity and brutality against suburan indulgence, social proprieties and mindless consumerism – as shape-shifted into a desire for another kind of real: the real of the unreal. There was no clear turning point, though perhaps 9/11 – as the millennia’s first globally visible violent realization of the real, so much “like a movie”3 – augured a shift in the wind, as several critics have noted, in terms of the almost uncanny folding of event into media (read as Hollywood films), and vice versa. Certainly, the appearance and appetite for the unreal drive the millennia’s culture of image production with particular energy: at some point in the last twenty years, the manipulations of photorealistic CGI imagery, which at the turn of the millennium so radically shattered the evidentiary bases of celluloid film images, crystallized into a cliché, rolled into “Photoshop fails” memes and counter-exposed by assertions of “natural” photographs, such as #NoMakeup and #wokeuplikethis selfies, paraded for no reason other than their lack of enhancement and touch-ups. The ubiquitous deployment of the “green screen” (if previously blue for film) used for compositing computer-generated images as backgrounds and foregrounds

12 Slavoj Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates (London; New York: Verso, 2002), 5-6. The defining cultural fiction of this argument would be The Wachowski Brothers’ (as they were then) 1999 film, The Matrix, whose plot and theme are precisely about the two realities against each other: the indulgence of a mindlessly accepted state of reality as conjured by puppeteering entities (the computers) as opposed to the cold and harshness of the real, or the thing itself.
to live actors also pumps out vast amounts of computer-manipulated photorealistic imagery, its ceaselessness not unlike the inhumanly generative Moloch machine so memorable in Fritz Lang’s 1922 film, *Metropolis*. Actors in various metamorphoses of digital skins appear onscreen as completely unrecognizable. The armies of computer graphic artists and visual effects technicians, evidenced in the increasing lengths of credits on visual effects work (VFX) scrolling at the end of every major blockbuster film, add to the gargantuan assemblages of CGI fakery production.

Like reciprocal presupposition, yottabytes of unreal images which engulf today’s visual culture, wearing their fakery and manipulation like a proud brand, drive a gluttony that is, in turn, driven by an unsated hunger. The previous centuries had been marked by a similar appetite for images, hungry for their realism – the central appeal of the Victorian panoramas, for example, was its totalization of a believable virtual environment around the viewer with photorealistic paintings, hidden boundaries, faux terrain, clever lighting and so on. Cinema at the turn of the twentieth century was attractive and (eventually) celebrated because of its capture not only of reality – a rushing train; a line of workers out of factory gates – but also the realism in its smallest and most intimate details: as Kracauer declares, cinema is the “instrument which could capture the slightest incidents of the world about us.”

We are still devouring images in monstrous appetites today, if anything more than ever, fanned by the currents of circulation gusting through our connectivity networks: the photographs and videos, the Instagram streams and the TikToks, the more than 500 hours of video around the world being uploaded onto YouTube every minute. But images in the twenty-first century feed a different hunger. These images are not so much unreal in the sense of CGI’s photorealism which so uncannily resemble their referents, to which we may point as the last answer to the question of flipping the real for the unreal. Rather, the images in the twenty-first century explicitly play *between* the real and the unreal, so that photorealism is no longer a representation, but an off-balance vacillation between extreme naturalism and unabashed fakery; between recognisability and open alteration; between realism and manifest manipulations. Dozens of photo filter apps available

---


15 Statista, “Hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute as of May 2019,” https://www.statista.com/statistics/259477/hours-of-video-uploaded-to-youtube-every-minute/#:~:text=As%20of%20May%202019%2C%20more,for%20online%20video%20has%20grown.
for our smartphones today are specific tools and advertisements for adjusting and enhancing Instagram photographs. CGI itself in the twenty-first century has become extreme fakery in the form of deepfakes, now not just about the computational manipulation of images, but the leveraging of machine learning and Artificial Intelligence in training generative neural network architectures to manipulate or produce photorealistic audiovisual content. This manner of image production is thus no longer about the exact duplication of the real, for there is none – the referent has, in short, moved into the realm of computational parsing and the reduction into patterns. Representation becomes the computational generation of a real that, as a result, is paradoxically so real and recognisable that it is no longer real and recognisable. These images thus ask questions beyond those of the real and the unreal which still plagued the era of CGI and digital manipulation. They point to a new discomfort, one borne out of vacillation rather than a specific positioning in one or the other. It is the discomfort with a new kind of uncanny photorealism – not a return to the real (as still figured by CGI), but an elevation to another level of limbo between the real and the unreal, one that is neither here nor there, and completely unhistorical.

Indeed, as life goes live online in the Covid-19 era restrictions on travel, socializing and meeting, the computational unreal of the real becomes a constant output of video imagery. Video conferencing platforms, now the lifeblood of work, play and socializing under Covid-19 lockdowns, offer real-time enhancements, or fakery in actual time. Features such as Zoom’s “touch up my appearance” filter work to “smooth out the skin tone on your face, to present a more polished looking appearance” during one’s live conference calls. Chinese video sharing websites, such as Bilibili, are flooded with videos that show young women whose features look dramatically changed in real-time on live calls. Their faces thus appear live onscreen in different presentations, whereby the “desired” face is one changed in real-time to feature enlarged eyes, smaller mouths and narrower chins – not without coincidence in line with the appearances of female anime faces: the actualized cartoonization of the real in actual time; or the unreal occupying the real in real time. Other videos show users’ faces in real-time calls with subtle changes made to their eyes so as to shift their eyelines, so that the user’s line of sight matches their audience’s onscreen, an effect that could only be achieved if the user looked straight into their camera rather than their screen.

In turn, the Work From Home (WFH) phenomenon, now embedded across the world as ushered in by governmental, travel and health restrictions in relation to Covid-19, \(^\text{17}\) has singlehandedly, if unexpectedly, migrated much of office and social life into the home. Via the webcam, engagements previously actual and embodied also digitize into constant streams of images. In a single tectonic heave as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virtuality of webcam images has substituted much of daily life, driving a visual culture ever more obsessed with consuming the real via the webcam in terms of the unreal by way of video enhancement in actual time, simulated backgrounds which change coherently with the user's movements, deepfake software and, surely in time to come, realistic real-time avatars which completely replace the actual. The vacillation between the real and the unreal is thus extant today not only in the consumption of images of the real while yet in open and blatant image manipulation, but also in real-time and with relentlessly deeper sophistication and firmer implantation. Our times of the real unreal, previously manifest only in print, digital and moving media, is now also live and literally alive, powered by the relentless production and consumption of its images.

As an exercise of deploying theoretical creativity to account for our contemporary culture and phenomena, the post-screen is thus also an experiment in naming this devouring. In transferring a conceptual spotlight onto the increasingly hidden and subverted boundaries between virtuality and actuality, the post-screen also draws attention to the appetites which drive that muddying, and the obsession of the virtual that does not so much replace the actual but merges with it, as with the formation of some kind of mutant hybrid. Boundaries matter here because they are the gateways to the gluttony for this unstable hybrid, constantly vacillating between the real and the unreal – the changed and “enhanced” looks and appearances which yet remain recognisable; the photographs of ourselves in our fattened Instagram accounts both realistic yet unrealistically perfect; the videos of ourselves that have become genuinely viable substitutes for living bodies at work and play complete with artificially corrected lines of sight in real-time. The issue is not of the real against the unreal, but the sense of this new pushing of their borderline, guzzled with consummate ease and efficiency because all natures of their boundaries are obscured and melded.

\(^{17}\) Google, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, JPMorgan, Capital One, Zillow, Slack, Amazon, PayPal, Salesforce and other major companies have allowed work-from-home to continue for the foreseeable future; Jack Kelly, “Here are the Companies Leading the Work-From-Home Revolution,” Forbes, May 24, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/05/24/the-work-from-home-revolution-is-quickly-gaining-momentum/.
The post-screen thus signals this different order of things – not a replacement of the original as with simulacra, but a compounded and amalgamated hybrid where virtuality melts and folds into the actual, and whose reality is simultaneously real and unreal. A hybrid whose real is as yet ungraspable and incomprehensible. The unadulterated form of the unreal might have crystallized at the turn of the millennia by way of avatars in virtual worlds such as Linden Lab’s Second Life, itself a veritable phenomenon from the turn of the millennia and at one point in 2013 boasting thirty-six million accounts and more than one million regular users.18 The leakage at the time between the onscreen realities of avatars existence and the actual realities of users was much documented and noted;19 it was really only a matter of time – a decade later, to be more precise – before that leakage became a full-on rush across screen boundaries into the current hybridization as a more scandalous and madder amalgamation between the actual and the virtual.

In this sense, the consumption of the mutant hybridity is not just of the constant streams, scrolls and walls of real-yet-unreal images, but, in some way, a devouring also of each other – and of ourselves – to the disappearance of ourselves, or at least some level of authenticity of ourselves. The removal of human agency from all manner of human activity, not least creative activity, is itself another and much wider anxiety: where and what is the role of the human if the computers are doing all the film creating, music composing, painting, writing, chess playing, stock brokering, even flying?20 The post-screen thus also becomes the conceptual space to accommodate this sense of collapsed boundaries between the human and the digital falling apart under the force of the gluttony unleashing the real-of-the-unreal in our ceaseless streams of images which overwhelm even our sense of ourselves as spectators. As Simon Lefebvre puts it, writing in precisely the context of movies being made today in this sense of the unreal: “all screens finally give in and spectators watch themselves disappear, swallowed by some green screen that they cannot see.”21

21 Simon Lefebvre, “The Disappearance of the Surface,” in Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship – A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment, eds. Dominique Chateau and José Moure
in a concluding mention of Steven Spielberg’s _Jurassic World_, the fourth film in a famous string of films which are all variations on the theme of humans trying to avoid being eaten by the dinosaurs they have scientifically created. As Lefebvre observes,

...the parallel between digital creation and scientific creation is clear and it is interesting to note that the whole movie is based on a system of explosion of separation, through the system of enclosures. Furthermore, all enclosures and protection devices are vitrified bubbles behind which humans are protected, at least for a while.

Lefebvre’s point is clear: along the way in the accelerating chain of digital imagery production, some sort of separation exploded and, as allegorized by the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park which eat its human creators, our uncannily photorealistic digital creations are also somehow consuming us. In the same sense of collapse, the beautiful avatars used in Second Life and other virtual worlds as our handles in that virtual reality have spilled into our Instagram feeds, social media accounts and online video calls as beautiful users in real-time, and this spillover is invasive, encroaching and threatening. In the post-screen breakdown of boundaries, we have somehow swallowed all the fakery in our images and spat them out as virtually masticated versions of ourselves, a process accelerated by the enforced migration to online existences due to Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions. This force of consumption is not quite coercive but mindless, not quite intimidating but a helpless thrall. This gluttony not only drives the space of the post-screen, but also colours it with a distinct aggression. The conduct of this all-encompassing absorption is not the antagonism of the twentieth century’s real in its shocks of brutality, disorder and destructiveness for a kind of sought-after clarity. It is an aggression of the ceaseless ingestion of signs which have no material existence out of the wilful oblivion or singular impossibility of knowing or realizing saturation, or a surfeit that is entirely without satisfaction. It is an entirely different kind of violence.

However, the flipside of gluttony is starvation – two extreme ends of a deadly spectrum which also meet up, where binging becomes a kind of response to deep deprivation. To the gluttony of reality television, to the bottomless satisfaction of watching ourselves as Baudrillardian ready-mades

**(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016): 97-106, 106.**

**22 Jurassic World, directed by Colin Trevorrow (2015; Universal City, CA: Universal, 2015), DVD.**

**23 Lefebvre, “The Disappearance of the Surface,” 106.**
(“cloned to our own image by high definition, and dedicated by involution into our own image to mediatic stupefaction”), 24 Baudrillard aligned and identified this mass consumption to “the mediatic class... starving on the other side of the screen, in front of an indifferent consuming mass, in front of the teleabsence of the masses.” 25 What feeds the voracity is hunger. Yet, the starvation in relation to the gluttony of the mutant unreal is more difficult to pinpoint. Perhaps it is the counter-response to the absolute of the twentieth century real in its brutality, as Žižek identified – a freaked withdrawal from its violence and terror, and from its bare-knuckled reflections of injustices and wars and misery and suffering, once held up as a mirror to the world's truths and now simply a route to overwhelming grief. Perhaps it is a deviated disengagement from the exponentially increased anxieties and stresses of millennial living, from eco-anxiety to the relentless exploitations of the precariate to the inexorably spiralling living costs of Generation Rent to the ever escalating culture wars and shit storms, at least in the Anglo-American sphere, whose extreme nastiness, personal attack and weaponization of social media only intensifies every year, or, seemingly, with every US election. All this with no apparent solution or resolution in sight. The starvation to the gluttony might also very well be a cry for help.

The Post-Screen in the Time of Covid-19

But the screen is not a mirror, and, while it was some kind of magic to pass beyond the mirror, there is no magic at all in passing beyond the screen. It's impossible anyway – there is no other side of the screen. No depth – just a surface. No hidden face – just an interface.

~ Jean Baudrillard 26

Whoever passes through the screen and meets reality on the other side has gone beyond jouissance.

~ Serge Daney 27

Per the opening quotations of this section, both Baudrillard and Daney allude to a certain process of passing through the screen, both with some

27 Daney, “The Screen of Fantasy,” 34.
accompanying sense of an access to a beyond. However, they arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions on this viability of passing. Baudrillard takes the starker position of flatly denying its possibility – to him, the spectating masses are on both sides of the screen, and so what joins across the divide are similar voids of panic-inducing simulacra, so that interactivity itself becomes a farce. In short, there is no reality beyond the reality of the simulacra.

For Daney, though, not only is there the possibility of passing through the screen into other realities, but its passage, moreover, becomes acutely profound as one which moves the viewer into territories of the deeply forbidden and prohibited. In the context of the quotation, Daney takes on André Bazin’s declaration of “no more cinema” – whereby reality and image are finally and completely merged – so that the screen becomes precisely this viable membrane of transparency, whose viewer may pass from one reality on one side to another on the other. This “cinema of transparency” thus also crowns the elimination of difference and distance between the image and its surroundings, whose resulting reality is now both image and object.

But the most interesting point of Daney’s provocation in passing through the screen is the prospect of the viewer having then entered a kind of utterly elusive zone – that of “beyond jouissance.” The translator notes jouissance as meaning “both pleasure and orgasm” (and an allusion to Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle); the passing through the screen – the experience of the reality once beyond the transparency between image and object – thus takes on not only enjoyment or satisfaction, but also the real of sexual gratification. In turn, though, sexual pleasure itself is double-edged, for the orgasm in French also contains connotations of death – à la le petite mort – which extends, in paradox, both the real and its impossibility beyond the screen. On one hand, le petite mort, as with the moment of death – “the unique moment par excellence,” as Bazin puts it – cannot be part of reality onscreen. As Bazin argues in his essay, “Death Every Afternoon,” both death and the sexual act

...[e]ach is in its own way the absolute negation of objective time, the qualitative instant in its purest form. Like death, love must be experienced and cannot be represented... without violating its nature. This violation is called obscenity.28

---

On the other hand, there is also no reality more real than death and love; and here we might likewise recall the conclusion to chapter 3, whereby only love is generative and transformative in the re-placed space of John Hull’s blindness made symptomatic through the near-darkness of the totalizing screen of its Virtual Reality (VR) project, *Notes on Blindness*. Daney, read with Bazin, thus gestures towards both the real and the unreal in that space beyond the screen, bound up in all the extremities of love, death, sex and pleasure. The extinguishing of screen boundaries itself – in passing through the screen – is thus also about these irreconcilable paradoxes of “beyond *jouissance*”: of accessing another level of reality real and unreal, visible and unrepresentable, forbidden and transgressed.

A certain madness in the crosshairs of these paradoxes thus lies in that space beyond the screen, a step we take at our peril. In that sense, the post-screen – in its extinguishing of boundaries and the ultimate disappearance of the fixed screen, as both a literal and figurative statement of the discombobulation of our mediated realities and truths today – also rests in those irrational indeterminacies as an edging onto an ultimate nihilism, or some kind of final apocalypse. The loss of the determination of the screen is precisely about this zone or sense of the forbidden – or to read Baudrillard another way, so prohibited it is impossible – because it heralds a zone of such profoundly irretrievable loss. The ground that shifted beneath the feet of truth with the advent of CGI and digital manipulation is in danger of disappearing altogether into a sinkhole of unrepresentability by virtue of the real descending entirely into the unreal. This, then, is the real peril of the post-screen: it is not just the real against the unreal, or just a question of that which is against representation; *it is the entire loss of representation in the place of real-unreal poles that cannot be grasped in its scandalous and impossible madness*. In this respect, Paul Virilio writes, too, of the disappearance of “the whole universe” in the literal loss of the image – per the quotation below – but he might as well also be speaking about the loss of the boundaries of the image, whose edges, or the “ontological” cut, are the very sense-makers of representation itself:

> In the West, the death of God and the death of art are indissociable [sic]; the zero degree of representation merely fulfilled the prophecy voiced a thousand years earlier by Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, during the quarrel with the iconoclasts: ‘if we remove the image, not only Christ but the whole universe disappears.’

---

At the same time – as already alluded above – the post-screen spreads beyond screens and image to other conditions of our world, namely, in current times, the Covid-19 global pandemic. On one hand, life under the pandemic has re-inserted the screen and its boundaries into our lives with almost ferocious violence as travel is restricted; work and study from home is instituted for foreseeable futures; and various degrees of governmentally decreed lockdown, particularly in Europe, relegate socialization back to screens and across screen boundaries. In that sense, the boundaries are never realer, where screen edges are also the symptoms of our “bubble” isolations, across which we reach to others, whose rigidities are cold reminders of our enforced confinements and severely restricted inabilities to travel.

On the other hand, the virus, as with the image of the post-screen, are also internal to us, and here is where the post-screen might augur the new condition of internalization as triangulated between media, environment and bodies. Perhaps, then, the ultimate post-script to the post-screen, for now at least, is how the Covid-evolved boundaries of the post-screen re-place to the boundaries of ourselves as human bodies, people and identities, and the questions of where, how and in what ways do we count as being in an existence now no longer just replete with screens, but made essential and indeed possible only through them. Via the screens of Covid-19, we have truly become streaming digits, our lives rendered into rushing packets of information which, in turn, form the socially viable and economically useful units operable in twenty-first century capitalism. This is the vision of Gibson’s *Neuromancer* writ large – each of us digital bits racing through the network – but without its exhilaration and romance of the cowboy adventure. Or perhaps, we can say, a technologically dystopic version of Jordan Peele’s 2019 film, *Us*, also a film of various boundary transgressions, whose binary worlds of rich/poor; have/have-nots; light/shadow similarly cleave across our current versions of ourselves as unstable vacillations between the real and the unreal. The post-screen of the Covid-19 screen landscape is thus the erased boundaries of manipulators and manipulated, a distinction that was relatively clear even in the plasticity of the CGI era. But in reducing ourselves to these digital bits, we have become manipulators of ourselves – our own men behind the curtain, our own Wizards of Oz. This time, though, there is no Toto to pull aside the curtain, and no “back room” of a little old man pulling the levers and pushing the buttons to literalize the scene of manipulation. That scene of manipulation has become us, each of us in front of our computer, laptop or tablet screen – or the post-screen out of the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps the true discontinuity of the post-screen is its paradoxical continuity, where the image persists but on
this alternative plane of also, as does Covid-19, changing the visibility and viability of ourselves as bodies in our media environments.

A final point: the post-screen, both today and/or accelerated or evolved by the Covid-19 pandemic, is thus most marked by this quality of dissolving boundaries: boundaries of screens or otherwise which mark distances and differences; contain and close off; demarcate and differentiate. But boundaries are also and always hubs of ceaseless flux and movement, or temporary spaces of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In that sense, even conventional screens can no longer stand by themselves, as Casetti also notes: “[Screens] have become transit hubs for the images that circulate in our social space. They serve to capture these images, to make them momentarily available for somebody somewhere – perhaps even in order to rework them – before they embark again on their journey.” In the hub of such ceaseless flux, the post-screen thus also heralds a different order of things – not the order of antagonism between simulacra and truth, whereby, as with Spider-Man (discussed in chapter 1), we try to discern with a tingle, to get that prickling of the neck as we seek to differentiate one from the other. In the post-screen, the order is one of no order: it is only about acceleration and volatility through our screens, or of ceaseless movement and activity across its boundaries. And, in a way, this, too, might herald new kinds of existences where, trapped even as we are in our screens in Covid-19 lockdowns, we find new liberations in new movements.

However, in another way, the endless fluidity and change might also only ring in a hopeless and helpless chase, like Orpheus running after Eurydice whom he was never going to get back – a tragic pursuit doomed from beginning to end. Perhaps all our activity and flux across the screens is simply a cover for a race towards something we have lost, to which we cannot give a name but can only vaguely sense amidst the noise and deceptions that constitute our contemporary underworld. It is also in this sense of fumbling through a dim memory that I valiantly and vainly try to recall the movie whose title I have forgotten: the one where, having spent much of it reeling from spectacular accident to accident caused by the interpenetration of two opposite realities – one fictional, one actual – the movie ends with a satisfying reclamation of order: the return of everything into their right places, as it were, on either side of the screen.