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EDITORIAL MANAGERS **SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN**

What is the relationship between contemporary digital media and contemporary society? Is it possible to affirm that digital media are without sin and exist purely in a complex socio-political and economic context within which the users bring with them their ethical and cultural complexities? This issue, through a range of scholarly writings, analyzes the problems of ethics and sin within contemporary digital media frameworks.

# WITHOUT SIN
## FREEDOM AND TABOO IN DIGITAL MEDIA

# Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

VOLUME EDITORS
**LANFRANCO ACETI & DONNA LEISHMAN**

EDITORIAL MANAGERS
**SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN**

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**Volume 19 Issue 4**

*NSA: No Speaking* Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

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*"Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!"*

*Frankenstein* (1931)

They must have felt like gods at the NSA when they discovered that they were able to spy on anyone. What feels ridiculous to someone that works with digital media is the level of ignorance that people continue to have about how much everyone else knows or can know about 'you.' If only people were willing to pay someone, or to spend a bit of time searching through digital data services themselves,they would discover a range of services that have started to commercialize collective data: bought and sold through a range of semi-public businesses and almost privatized governmental agencies. Public records of infractions and crimes are available for 'you' to know what 'your' neighbor has been up to.These deals, if not outright illegal, are characterized by unsolved ethical issues since they are a 'selling' of state documents that were never supposed to be so easily accessible to a global audience.

Concurrently as I write this introduction, I read that the maddened Angela Merkel is profoundly shocked that her mobile phone has been tapped into – this is naive at best but also deeply concerning: since to not understand what has happened politically and technologically in the 21st century one must have been living on the moon.Perhaps it is an act or a pantomimestagedfor the benefit of those 'common' people that need to continue living with the strong

belief or faith that their lives are in good hands, that of the state.

Nevertheless it speaks of a 'madness' of the politician as a category. A madness characterized by an alienation from the rest of society that takes the form of isolation. This isolation is, in Foucauldian terms, none other than the enforcement of a voluntary seclusion in the prison and the mad house.

The prisons within which the military, corporate, financial and political worlds have shut themselves in speak increasingly of paranoia and fear. As such the voluntary prison within which they have sought refuge speaks more and more the confused language that one may have imagined to hear from the *Stultifera Navis*.

Paranoia, narcissism and omnipotence, all belong to the delirium of the sociopaths, [1] who push towards the horizon, following the trajectory set by the 'deranged minds.'

*It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks.* [2]

This otherworldliness – this being an alien from another world – has increasingly become the characteristic of contemporary political discourse, which, detached from the reality of the 'majority' of people, feeds into the godlike complex. Foolishness and lunacy reinforce this perspective, creating a rationale that drives the

*Stultifera Navis* towards its destiny inexorably, bringing all others with them.

Having segregated themselves in a prison of their own doing, the politicians look at all others as being part of a large mad house. It is from the upper deck of a gilded prison that politicians stir the masses in the lower decks into a frenzy of fear and obedience.

*Why should it be in this discourse, whose forms we have seen to be so faithful to the rules of reason, that we find all those signs which will most manifestly declare the very absence of reason?* [3]

Discourses, and in particular political discourses, no longer mask the reality of madness and with it the feeling of having become omnipotent talks of human madness in its attempt to acquire the impossible: that of being not just godlike, but God.

As omnipotent and omniscient gods the NSA should allow the state to 'see.'The reality is that the 'hands' of the state are no longer functional and have been substituted with prostheses wirelessly controlled by the sociopaths of globalized corporations. Theamputation of the hands happenedwhile the state itself was merrily looking somewhere else, tooblissfullybusy counting the money that was flowing through neo-capitalistic financial dreams of renewed prosperity and Napoleonic grandeur.

The madness is also in the discourse about data, deprived of ethical concerns and rootedwithinperceptions of both post-democracy and post-state.So much so that we could speak of a post-data society, within which the current post-societal existence is the consequence of profound changes and alterations to an ideal way of living that technology – as its greatest sin – still presents as participatory and horizontal but not as plutocratic and hierarchical.

In order to discuss the present post-societal condition, one would need first to analyze the cultural disregard that people have, or perhaps have acquired, for their personal data and the increasing lack of participation in the alteration of the frameworks set for post-data.

This disregard for personal data is part of cultural forms of concession and contracting that are determined and shaped not by rights but through the mass loss of a few rights in exchange for a) participation in a product as early adopters (Google), b) for design status and appearance (Apple), c) social conventions and entertainment (Facebook) and (Twitter).

Big data offers an insight into the problem of big losses if a catastrophe, accidental or intentional, should ever strike big databases. The right of ownership of the 'real object' that existed in the data-cloudwill become the new arena of post-data conflict. In this context of loss, if the crisis of the big banks has demonstrated anything, citizens will bear the brunt of the losses that will be spread iniquitously through 'everyone else.'

The problem is therefore characterized by multiple levels of complexity that can overall be referred to as a general problem of ethics.Of data, interpreted asthe ethical collection and usage of massive amounts of data. Also the ethical issues of post-data and their technologies has to be linked to a psychological understanding of the role that individuals play within society, both singularly and collectively through the use of media that engender new behavioral social systems through the access and usage of big data as sources of information.

Both Prof. Johnny Golding and Prof. Richard Gere present in this collection of essays two perspectives that, by looking at taboos and the sinful nature of technology, demand from the reader a reflection on

the role that ethics plays or no longer plays within contemporary mediated societies.

Concepts of technological neutrality as well as economic neutrality have become enforced taboos when the experiential understanding is that tools that possess a degree of danger should be handled with a modicum of self-control and restraint.

The merging of economic and technological neutrality has generated corporate giants that have acquired a global stronghold on people's digital data. In the construction of arguments in favor or against a modicum of control for these economic and technological giants,the state and its political representatives have thus far considered it convenient not to side with the libertarian argument, since the control was being exercised on the citizen; a category to which politicians and corporate tycoons and other plutocrats and higher managers believe they do not belong to or want to be reduced to.

The problem is then not so much that the German citizens, or the rest of the world, were spied on. The taboo that has been infringed is that Angela Merkel, a head of state, was spied on. This implies an unwillingly democratic reduction from the NSA of all heads of state to 'normal citizens.' The disruption and the violated taboo is that all people are data in a horizontal structure that does not admit hierarchical distinctions and discriminations. In this sense perhaps digital data are violating the last taboo: anyone can be spied upon, creating a truly democratic society of surveillance.

The construction of digital data is such that there is not a normal, a superior, a better or a worse, but everything and everyone is reduced to data. That includes Angela Merkel and any other head of state. Suddenly the process of spying represents a welcome reduction to a basic common denominator: there is no

difference between a German head of state or a blue collar worker; the NSA can spy on both and digital data are collected on both.

If anything was achieved by the NSA it was an egalitarian treatment of all of those who can be spied upon: a horizontal democratic system of spying that does not fear class, political status or money. This is perhaps the best enactment of American egalitarianism: we spy upon all equally and fully with no discrimination based on race, religion, social status, political affiliation or sexual orientation.

But the term spying does not quite manifest the profound level of Panopticon within which we happen to have chosen to live, by giving up and squandering inherited democratic liberties one right at a time, through one agreement at a time, with one click at a time.

These are some of the contemporary issues that this new LEA volume addresses, presenting a series of writings and perspectives from a variety of scholarly fields.

This LEA volume is the result of a collaboration with Dr. Donna Leishman and presents a varied number of perspectives on the infringement of taboos within contemporary digital media.

This issue features a new logo on its cover, that of New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

My thanks to Prof. Robert Rowe, Professor of Music and Music Education; Associate Dean of Research and Doctoral Studies at NYU, for his work in establishing this collaboration with LEA.

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**Lanfranco Aceti**
*Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac*
*Director, Kasa Gallery*

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*NSA: No Speaking* Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.
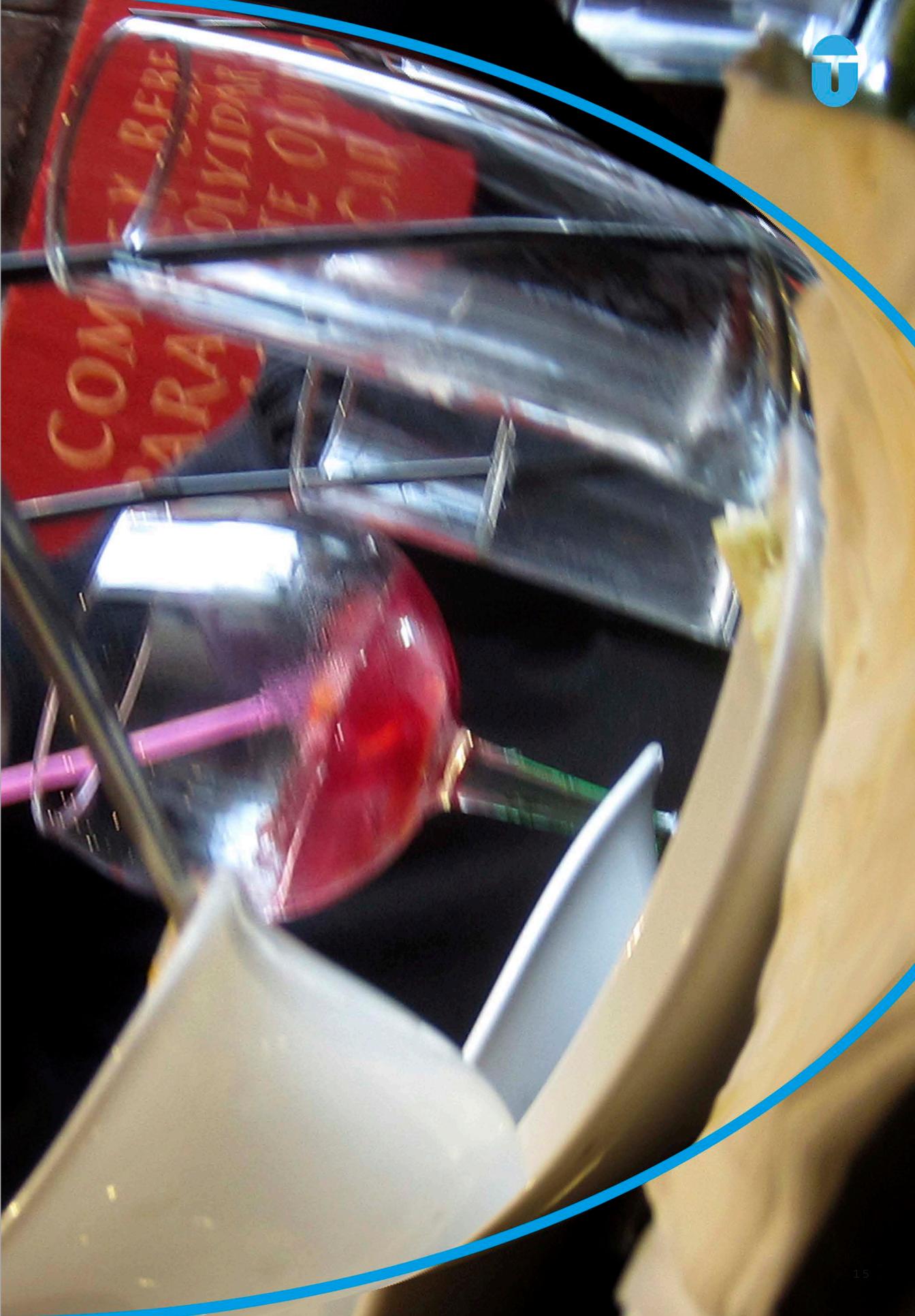
# Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

### INTRODUCTION

"Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media" is both the title of this special edition and the title of a panel that was held at ISEA 2011. The goal of the panel was to explore the disinhibited mind's ability to exercise freedom, act on desires and explore the taboo whilst also surveying the boarder question of the moral economy of human activity and how this is translates (or not) within digital media. The original panelists (some of whom have contributed to the this edition) helped to further delineate additional issues surrounding identity, ethics, human socialization and the need to better capture/understand/perceive how we are being affected by our technologies (for good or bad).

In the call for participation, I offered the view that contemporary social technologies are continuously changing our practical reality, a reality where human experience and technical artifacts have become beyond intertwined, but for many interwoven, inseparable – if this were to be true then type of cognizance (legal and personal) do we need to develop? Implied in this call is the need for both a better awareness and jurisdiction of these emergent issues. Whilst this edition is not (and could not be) a unified survey of human activity and digital media; the final edition contains 17 multidisciplinary papers spanning Law, Curation, Pedagogy, Choreography, Art History, Political Science, Creative Practice and Critical Theory – the volume attempts to illustrate the complexity of the situation and if possible the kinship between pertinent disciplines.

*Human relationships are rich and they're messy and they're demanding. And we clean them up with technology. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self, as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right.* [1]

Sherry Turkle's current hypothesis is that technology has introduced mechanisms that bypass traditional concepts of both community and identity indeed that we are facing (and some of us are struggling with) an array of reconceptualizations. Zygmunt Bauman in his essay "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity" suggests that:

*One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety if behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.* [2]

Our 'post-social' context where increased communication, travel and migration bought about by technological advances has only multiplied Bauman's conditions of uncertainty. Whilst there may be aesthetic tropes within social media, there is no universally accepted authority within contemporary culture nor is there an easy mutual acceptance of what is 'right and proper' after all we could be engaging in different iterations of "backward presence" or "forward presence" [3] whilst interacting with human and non-human alike (see Simone O'Callaghan's contribution: "Seductive Technologies and Inadvertent Voyeurs" for a further exploration of presence and intimacy).

Editing such a broad set of responses required an editorial approach that both allowed full expansion of each paper's discourse whilst looking for interconnections (and oppositions) in attempt to distil some commonalties. This was achieved by mentally placing citation, speculation and proposition between one another. Spilling the 'meaning' of the individual contributions into proximate conceptual spaces inhabited by other papers and looking for issues that overlapped or resonated allowed me formulate a sense of what might become future pertinent themes, and what now follows below are the notes from this process.

### What Social Contract?

*Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.* (Thomas Hobbes in chapter XIII of the *Leviathan* [4])

Deborah Swack's "FEELTRACE and the Emotions (after Charles Darwin)," Johnny Golding's "Ana-Materialism & The Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast" and Kriss Ravetto's "Anonymous Social As Political" argue that our perception of political authority is somewhere between shaky towards becoming erased altogether. Whilst the original 17th century rational for sublimating to a political authority – i.e. we'd default back to a war like state in the absence of a binding social contract – seems like a overwrought fear, the capacity for repugnant anti-social behavior as a consequence of no longer being in awe of any common power is real and increasingly impactful. [5] Problematically the notion of a government that has been created by individuals to protect themselves from one another sadly seems hopelessly incongruent in today's increasingly skeptical context. Co-joined to the dissipation of perceptible political entities – the power dynamics of being 'good' rather than 'bad' and or 'sinful' appears to be one of most flimsy of our prior social borders. The new reality that allows us to transgress and explore our tastes and predictions from a remote and often depersonalized position feels safer (i.e. with less personal accountability) a scenario that is a further exacerbated space vacated by the historic role of the church as a civic authority. Mikhail Pushkin in his paper "Do we need morality anymore?" explores the online moral value system and how this ties into the deleterious effect of the sensationalism in traditional mass media. He suggests that the absence of restrictive online social structure means the very consciousness of sin and guilt has now changed and potentially so has our capability of experiencing the emotions tied to guilt. [6] Sandra Wilson and Lila Gomez in their paper "The Premediation of Identity Management in Art & Design – New Model Cyborgs – Organic & Digital" concur stating that "the line dividing taboos from desires is often blurred, and a taboo can quickly flip into a desire, if the conditions under which that interaction take place change."

### The Free?

The issue of freedom seems to be where much of the debate continues – between what constitutes false liberty and real freedoms. Unique in their own approach Golding's and Pushkin's papers challenge the premise that is implied in this edition's title – that 'Freedom and Taboo' even have a place at all in our contemporary existence as our established codes of morality (and ethics) have been radically reconfigured. This stance made me recall Hobbes's first treaty where he argued that "commodious living" (i.e. morality, politics, society), are purely conventional and that moral terms are not objective states of affairs but are reflections of tastes and preferences – indeed within another of his key concepts (i.e. the "State of Nature") 'anything goes' as nothing is immoral and or unjust. [6] It would 'appear' that we are freer from traditional institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e.

procedures, networks, our relationship to objects and things) seem to have dissipated alongside our capacity to perceive them. The problematic lack of an established conventional commodious living such as Bauman's idea that something is 'right and proper' is under challenge by the individualized complexity thrown up from our disinhibited minds, which can result in benign or toxic or 'other' behaviors depending on our personality's variables. [7] Ravetto describes how Anonymous consciously inhabits such an 'other' space:

> Anonymous demonstrates how the common cannot take on an ethical or coherent political message. It can only produce a heterogeneity of spontaneous actions, contradictory messages, and embrace its contradictions, its act of vigilante justice as much as its dark, racist, sexist, homophobic and predatory qualities.

### Perception
Traditionally good cognition of identity/society/relationships (networks and procedures) was achieved through a mix of social conditioning and astute mindfulness. On the other hand at present the dissipation of contiguous social forms has problematized the whole process creating multiple social situations (new and prior) and rather than a semi-stable situation (to reflect upon) we are faced with a digital deluge of unverifiable information. Perception and memory comes up in David R. Burns's paper "Media, Memory, and Representation in the Digital Age: Rebirth" where he looks at the problematic role of digital mediation in his personal experience of the 9/11. He recalls the discombobulating feeling of being: "part of the digital media being internationally broadcast across the world." Burns seeks to highlight the media's influence over an individual's constructed memories. From a different perspective Charlie Gere reminds us of the prominence (and shortcomings) of our ocular-centric perspective in his discussion of "Alterity, Pornography,

and the Divine" and cites Martin Jay's essay "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" [8] which in turn explores a variety of significant core concepts of modernity where vision and knowledge meet and influence one another. Gere/Jay's line of references resurrect for the reader Michel Foucault's notion of the "Panopticon" (where surveillance is diffused as a principle of social organization), [9] Guy DeDord's *The Society of the Spectacle* i.e. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation") [10] and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (published in 1979). [11] The latter gave form to an enduringly relevant question: are we overly reliant on a representational theory of perception? And how does this intersect with the risks associated with solipsistic introjection within non face-to-face online interactions? The ethics of 'looking' and data collection is also a feature of Deborah Burns's paper "Differential Surveillance of Students: Surveillance/Sousveillance Art as Opportunities for Reform" in which Burns asks questions of the higher education system and its complicity in the further erosion of student privacy. Burn's interest in accountability bridges us back to Foucault's idea of panoptic diffusion:

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection [12]

In panoptic diffusion the knowingness of the subject is key – as we move towards naturalization of surveillance and data capture through mass digitization such power relationships change. This is a concern mirrored by Eric Schmidt Google's Executive Chairman when considering the reach of our digital footprints: "I don't believe society understands what happens when everything is available, knowable and recorded

by everyone all the time." [13] Smita Kheria's "Copyright and Digital Art practice: The 'Schizophrenic' Position of the Digital Artist" and Alana Kushnir's "When Curating Meets Piracy: Rehashing the History of Unauthorised Exhibition-Making" explore accountability and power relationships in different loci whilst looking at the mitigation of creative appropriation and reuse. It is clear that in this area serious reconfigurations have occurred and that new paradigms of acceptability (often counter to the legal reality) are at play.

Bauman's belief that "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs" [14] maybe a clue into why social media have become such an integral part of modern society. It is after all an activity that privileges 'looking' and objectifying without the recipient's direct engagement – a new power relationship quite displaced from traditional (identity affirming) social interactions. In this context of social media over dependency it may be timely to reconsider Guy-Ernest Debord's 'thesis 30':

> The 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. [15]

Underneath these issues of perception / presence / identity / is a change or at least a blurring in our political (and personal) agency. Don Ritter's paper "Content Osmosis and the Political Economy of Social Media" functions as a reminder of the historical precedents and continued subterfuges that occur in mediated feelings of empowerment. Whilst Brigit Bachler in her paper "Like Reality" presents to the reader that "besides reality television formats, social networking sites such as Facebook have successfully delivered a new form of watching each other, in a seemingly safe

setting, on a screen at home" and that "the appeal of the real becomes the promise of access to the reality of manipulation." [16] The notion of better access to the 'untruth' of things also appears in Ravetto's paper "Anonymous: Social as Political" where she argues that "secrecy and openness are in fact aporias." What is unclear is that, as society maintains its voyeuristic bent and the spectacle is being conflated into the banality of social media, are we becoming occluded from meaningful developmental human interactions? If so, we are to re-create a sense of agency in a process challenged (or already transformed) by clever implicit back-end data gathering [17] and an unknown/undeclared use our data's mined 'self.' Then, and only then, dissociative anonymity may become one strategy that allows us to be more independent; to be willed enough to see the world from our own distinctive needs whilst devising our own extensions to the long genealogy of moral concepts.

### Somewhere / Someplace
Perpetual evolution and sustained emergence is one of the other interconnecting threads found within the edition. Many of the authors recognize a requirement for fluidity as a reaction to the pace of change. Geographer David Harvey uses the term "space-time compression" to refer to "processes that . . . revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time." [18] Indeed there seems to be consensus in the edition that we are 'in' an accelerated existence and a concomitant dissolution of traditional spatial co-ordinates – Swack cites Joanna Zylinska's 'human being' to a perpetual "human becoming" [19] whilst Golding in her paper reminds us that Hobbes also asserted that "[f]or seeing life is but a motion of Limbs" [20] and that motion, comes from motion and is inextricably linked to the development and right of the individual. But Golding expands this changing of state further and argues where repetition (and loop) exist so does a different experience:

*The usual culprits of time and space (or time as distinct from space and vice versa), along with identity, meaning, Existenz, Being, reconfigure via a relational morphogenesis of velocity, mass, and intensity. This is an immanent surface cohesion, the compelling into a 'this' or a 'here' or a 'now,' a space-time terrain, a collapse and rearticulation of the tick-tick-ticking of distance, movement, speed, born through the repetitive but relative enfolding of otherness, symmetry and diversion.*

Golding's is a bewildering proposition requiring a frame of mind traditionally fostered by theoretical physicists but one that may aptly summarize the nature of the quandary. The authors contributing to this edition all exist in their own ways in a post-digital environment, anthropologist Lucy Suchman describes this environment as being "the view from nowhere, detached intimacy, and located accountability." [21] Wilson and Gomez further offer a possible coping strategy by exploring the usefulness of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's "pre-mediation" as a means to externalize a host of fears and reduce negative emotions in the face of uncertainty. The imperative to create some strategies to make sense of some of these pressing issues is something that I explore in my own contribution in which I offer the new term *Precarious Design* – as a category of contemporary practice that is emerging from the design community. Precarious Design encompasses a set of practices that by expressing current and near future scenarios are well positioned to probe deeper and tease out important underlying societal assumptions to attain understanding or control in our context of sustained cultural and technological change.

### Embodiment

In theory our deterritorialized and changed relationship with our materiality provides a new context in which a disinhibited mind could better act on desires and explore the taboo. Ken Hollings's paper "THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS, SALLY... Faults, lapses and imperfections in the sex life of machines" – presents a compelling survey of the early origin of when humans began to objectify and try live through our machines starting with disembodiment of voice as self that arose from the recording of sound via the Edison phonograph in 1876. Golding and Swack mull over the implications of the digital on embodiment and what it means now to be 'human' as we veer away from biological truth and associated moral values towards something else. Sue Hawksley's "Dancing on the Head of a Sin: touch, dance and taboo" reminds us of our sensorial basis in which:

*Touch is generally the least shared, or acknowledged, and the most taboo of the senses. Haptic and touch-screen technologies are becoming ubiquitous, but although this makes touch more commonly experienced or shared, it is often reframed through the virtual, while inter-personal touch still tends to remain sexualized, militarized or medicalized (in most Western cultures at least).*

Within her paper Hawksley provides an argument (and example) on how the mediation of one taboo – dance – through another – touch – could mitigate the perceived moral dangers and usual frames of social responsibility. Swack raises bioethical questions about the future nature of life for humans and "the embodiment and containment of the self and its symbiotic integration and enhancement with technology and machines." Whilst Wilson and Gomez's go on to discuss *Bioprescence* by Shiho Fukuhara and Georg Tremmel – a project that provocatively "creates Human DNA trees by transcoding the essence of a human being within the DNA of a tree in order to create 'Living Memorials' or 'Transgenic Tombstones'" [22] – as an example of a manifest situation that still yields a (rare) feeling of transgression into the taboo.

### CONCLUSION

In the interstices of this edition there are some questions/observations that remain somewhat unanswered and others that are nascent in their formation. They are listed below as a last comment and as a gateway to further considerations.

Does freedom from traditional hierarchy equate to empowerment when structures and social boundaries are also massively variable and dispersed and are pervasive to the point of incomprehension/invalidation? Or is there some salve to be found in Foucault's line that "'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure," [23] thus nothing is actually being 'lost' in our current context? And is it possible that power has always resided within the individual and we only need to readjust to this autonomy?

Conventional political power (and their panoptic strategies) seem to be stalling, as efforts to resist and subvert deep-seated and long-held governmental secrecy over military/intelligence activities have gained increased momentum while their once privileged data joins in the leaky soft membrane that is the ethics of sharing digitally stored information.

Through dissociative strategies like online anonymity comes power re-balance, potentially giving the individual better recourse to contest unjust actions/laws but what happens when we have no meaningful social contract to direct our civility? Its seems pertinent to explore if we may be in need of a new social contract that reconnects or reconfigures the idea of accountability – indeed it was interesting to see the contrast between Suchman's observed 'lack of accountability' and the Anonymous collective agenda of holding (often political or corporate) hypocrites 'accountable' through punitive measures such as Denial-of-Service attacks.

Regarding de-contextualization of the image / identity – there seems to be something worth bracing oneself against in the free-fall of taxonomies, how we see, how we relate, how we perceive, how we understand that even the surface of things has changed and could still be changing. There is no longer a floating signifier but potentially an abandoned sign in a cloud of dissipating (or endlessly shifting) signification. Where once:

*The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.* [24]

There now is no culturally specific normal in the diffuse digital-physical continuum, which makes the materiality and durability of truth very tenuous indeed; a scenario that judges-teaches-social workers are having some difficulty in addressing and responding to in a timely manner, an activity that the theoretically speculative and methodologically informed research as contained within this edition can hopefully help them with.

**Donna Leishman**
*Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design*
*University of Dundee, UK*
*d.leishman@dundee.ac.uk*
*http://www.6amhoover.com*

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. As perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche would argue... He has previously described "orgies of feelings" that are directly linked to our capacity to feel sin and guilt. "To wrench the human soul from its moorings, to immerse it in terrors, ice, flames, and raptures to such an extent that it is liberated from all petty displeasure, gloom, and depression as by a flash of lightning" Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Horace Samuel (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 139.

6. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 409.

7. Consequential subsets within a disinhibited mind are dissociative anonymity (you don't know me) and dissociative imagination (its just a game), which can lead to benign actions such as random acts of kindness or being more affectionate or potentially toxic (exploring more violent assertive sides of ones nature) and 'other' behaviors.

. See: John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *Cyber-Psychology and Behavior* 7 (2004): 321-326.

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15. "The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The 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." Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 30.

16. Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV, The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004): 120-122.

17. Mirko Schäfer highlights the role of implicit participation in the success of the Web 2.0. a situation where user activities are implemental unknowingly in interfaces and back-end design.

. Mirko Schäfer, *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production (*Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 249.

18. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 240.

19. Joanna Zylinska, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 10.

20. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 56.

21. Lucy Suchman, "Located Accountabilities In Technology Production," 2010, http://www.sciy.org/2010/05/22/located-accountabilities-in-technology-production-by-lucy-suchman/ (accessed April 30, 2013).

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23. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge,* (London, Penguin, 1998), 63.

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# "There must be something wrong with this, Sally…"

Faults, Lapses and Imperfections in the Sex Lives of Machines

by

### Ken Hollings

Independent Researcher
http://www.kenhollings.blogspot.com.
kenhollings@hotmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects:*

*The early engine is a logical assembly of elements defined by their total and single function. Each element can best accomplish its particular function if it is like a perfectly finished instrument that is completely oriented towards the accomplishment of that function. A permanent exchange of energy between two elements may be seen as an imperfection if this exchange is not part of their theoretical functioning. Also, there exists a primitive form of the technical object, its abstract form, in which each theoretical and material unity is treated as an absolute that has an intrinsic perfection of its own that needs to be constituted as a closed system in order to function. In this case, the integration of the particular unit into the ensemble involves a series of problems to be resolved, problems that are called technical but which, in fact, are problems concerning the compatibility of already given ensembles.* [1]

## ABSTRACT

*Starting with a remarkable private recording made by two drunken women, identified only as "Sal Boo" this essay looks at how imperfections, slips and lapses have characterized our relationship with technology. As the women jeer, curse and make lewd suggestions to their home phonograph, which they rightly suspect to be malfunctioning, the provenance of these mistakes is revealed to be both intimate and highly charged. Linked via Norbert Weiner's concept of feedback, as outlined in his theory of Cybernetics, and Turing's adaptation of the Imitation Game as a test for machine intelligence, the responses of conversational programmes such as ELIZA and PARRY, as well later iterations such as Clever-Bot, reveal a similar set of errors at work in the networked relationship between humans and machines of today.*

## SAL BOO

Identified only as "Sal Boo," it is the sixteenth track on *One of One*: a compilation CD released just before the end of the previous century by Dish Recordings of St Helena, California. Beyond that, there is little to indicate just how extraordinary it is – except perhaps for what can be determined from the slurred and lurching content of track number fifteen: "Betsy Sal." Under the subtitle "Snapshots in Sound" *One of One* offers to the listener a somewhat impassive archive of early recordings made on the home phonograph. "Affordable motion picture cameras and sound recording equipment ushered in an era of mass self-consciousness," the disc's liner notes observe. "The recording phonograph forced people to become performers in a far more profound sense than did the camera, so easily are emotions given away by a quaver in the voice, or a slip of the tongue." [2] In the days before the reel-to-reel tape recorder became a functioning part of the family household, the recording phonograph offered a unique auditory experience: the sound of your own voice stored permanently on a gramophone record which can then be played back again and again at any time in the future. Unlike magnetic tape, however, it cannot be erased or recorded over. The result is a unique physical object conceptually and materially no different from Thomas Edison's earliest cylinders and therefore capable of provoking the same response.

"There must be something wrong with this, Sally…" [3] is the first coherent statement to be heard on "Sal Boo." A woman is speaking, and she sounds uncertain: hesitating and then starting of her sentence from the beginning again. If the warped singing voices captured on "Betsy Sal" are anything to go by, the woman has every reason to sound doubtful. The recording device in the room with her is not working at all properly. A snapshot in sound starts to develop, fixing itself in the listener's rapt attention. Betsy and Sally are both teachers. It's a Thursday night; and from their conversational non-sequiturs, repeated phrases, bursts of laughter and off-colour remarks it quickly becomes clear that they have been drinking. Not all the slurring of their words can be put down to intoxication, however. Betsy and Sally's attempt to record a sarcastic

sing-along about the miseries of life as a teacher has not worked out properly, resulting in the wavering melodic jerks of "Betsy Sal" to which the recording gramophone's unsteady turntable speed has added an unexpected rhythmic accompaniment.

To make matters worse, the device currently registering their outpourings has just come back from the repairman but has clearly not been fixed at all. *"In fact,"* Sally announces, *"I think they duped you on the whole deal, and I think you ought to punch that fat little man in the record department right in the noooose."* [4] One of the females later expresses a desire to *"take this lovely machine and..cram it up that lovely little man's rear-end."* [5] Furthermore Sally can't stand the sight of the tone arm *"bobbing up and down."* [6] A loud Bronx cheer is blown into the recording device, which impassively maintains its presence as a silent participant in Sal Boo's drunken orgy. Profanities and laughter are mixed with insulting nicknames and nonsensical wordplay; references to double beds and absent boyfriends run alongside cryptic asides about being hit *"in the head with a bloody axe."* [7] The climax only comes when instructions from the machine's own operating manual are read back to it by one of the women. *"Readjust the tone arm to make a good recording.."* [8] This closing of the information loop provides a rare moment of clarity in Betsy and Sally's mechanically rendered delirium, although nothing in this particular recording could be mistaken for rational behaviour. Certainly no amount of replaying can ever exhaust the broad, playful and giggling exuberance with which Betsy and Sally confront their malfunctioning phonograph. Recorded, circumstantial evidence suggests, during the period immediately after World War II, perhaps the most remarkable thing about "Sal Boo" – together with the accompanying "Betsy Sal" – is that it has survived managed to survive intact into the twenty-first century. Its final self-consciously abstracted exchange is almost too perfect. *"Oh, I can't*

*think of anything..."* [9] one of the females announces despairingly just before the machine stops recording her voice altogether and we are left with nothing but the undifferentiated crackle of the needle hitting the run-off groove – and after that only silence.

To get from *"There must be something wrong with this, Sally..."* to *"Oh, I can't think of anything..."* takes a little over three minutes. The experience it represents is profound, however. The sound of your own voice recorded phonographically takes you out of your own head: everything that was formerly held in by the formal pose, the polite and carefully enunciated remark is suddenly set free and becomes a form of noise. A new kind of hysteria is registered, one that is frequently drunk, occasionally uninhibited and rarely alone. A quick comparison between "Sal Boo" and some of the other recordings captured on *One of One* reveals that there appear to be only two ways of confronting the recording phonograph: stilted and stiff declamation or uncontrolled and perverse babbling. "When he opened the valve of his wit, he seemed to follow after the stream of his words without any control of them," a friend will later recall of the poet and playwright Alfred Jarry, notorious for his prodigious consumption of alcohol. "It was no longer a person speaking but a machine driven by some demon. His jerky voice, metallic and nasal, his abstract puppet-like gestures, his fixed expression; his torrential and incoherent flow of language, his grotesque or brilliant images, this synchronization which today we should compare to the movies or the phonograph – all this astonished me, amused me, irritated me and ended by upsetting me." [10]

### FOR I IS ANOTHER

"Machines break – people don't," declares a woman behind the counter at Gatwick Airport referring to

the problems they have been experiencing during the day with their automatic ticket dispensers. Beyond the interconnectivity of their parts, machines have little discernible inner life of their own: humans are consequently drawn towards emulating their outer display as a form of eroticism. Behind the relentless pop-cultural trope of the 'sex machine,' mechanical devices redefine pleasure by first isolating and then intensifying sensory impressions, hardening and hollowing out the flesh to the point of numbness. Straps and paddles, pumps and costumes, cameras and vibrators form themselves and their operators into an assembly line of new pleasures. Ideally, however, the careful arrangement of bodies described by Simondon should be meshed with an equally careful arrangement of pleasures. Both, however, are mediated by the uneven relationship that exists between an isolated inner self and the interconnected motions of the mechanical world. "Shortly after the semi-automatic machines were introduced," observes Jean-Paul Sartre, "investigations showed that female skilled workers would allow themselves to lapse while working into a sexual kind of daydream: they would recall the bedroom, the bed, the night and all that concerns only the person within the solitude of the couple alone with itself. But it was the machine in her which was dreaming of caresses." [11] No matter how smoothly this machine runs, the externalization of such intimacies leads to the inevitable appearance of inefficiencies and imperfections within the logical assembly of its parts.

Perfectly captured and therefore highlighted by our recording devices, there have always been inefficiencies and imperfections, lapses, stutterings and pauses that call out to us from somewhere beyond our senses. Their presence can be detected in the dislocated punctuation and fractured syntax that the poet Arthur Rimbaud brings to his two "visionary letters," written at the dawn of the "Founding Age" during which the mechanical reproduction of sound, moving images and typo

graphic text quickly flourish. "For I is another," he writes to Paul Demeny on May 15 1871. "If brass wakes up a bugle, it is not its fault." [12] By 1876 the sounding horn which Rimbaud identifies with the conscious mind has been uncoupled from the human mouth and connected up instead to the registering stylus of the Edison phonograph. Speech, as *Scientific American* proudly proclaims at the time, had become immortal. "I witness the unfolding of my thought," Rimbaud observes in advance of this moment. "I watch it, I listen to it." [13]

The recipient of this thought is brother to Georges Demeny, who goes on to develop "The Photography of Speech": a new technique by which deaf-mutes might, he hopes, emulate the images of the human mouth in motion and thus learn to repeat certain simple phrases out loud. "The poet makes himself a visionary," Rimbaud reveals to Georges' brother, "by a long, immense and rational deregulation of all the senses." [14] To deregulate the senses, to respond to what lies beyond them, is to externalise them and ultimately to leave them behind. When, at the age of 63, the great operatic soprano Adelina Patti hears a recording of her own voice for the first time, she blows ecstatic kisses into the brass horn of the gramophone. *"Ah! Mon Dieu!"* she trills. *"Maintenant je comprehends pourquoi je suis Patti!"* [15] Forced to perform in unison, Georges Demeny's audiences of deaf-mutes externalize human speech but only as an early form of silent cinema. Growing discouraged, Georges eventually returns to the passion of his youth: gymnastics. Sigmund Freud, in the meantime, rejects any suggestion that sessions with his patients should be recorded, fearing the play of inhibitions that might ensue from having a recording phonograph in the room. The careful formality with which they might address this new technology would, he suspects, prevent his patients from making the lapses, slips and mistakes that give utterance to their fleeting innermost selves. Not everyone can make the same joyful self-discovery as Madame Patti.

## AN ATTACK OF VIOLENT INSANITY

Machines break – people adapt. "There is no essential difference between a human brain and a machine," asserts *Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius*, a Futurist manifesto hammered out by Bruno Corradi and Emilio Settimelli in 1914. "It is mechanically more complicated, that is all. For example, a typewriter is a primitive organism governed by a logic imposed on it by its construction." [16] Having established that all human activity "is a projection of nervous energy," the manifesto equates the basic physiological components of poetry with those of the typing machine. "A broken key," claim Corradi and Settimelli, "is an attack of violent insanity." [17] Typographical text constitutes a biomechanical entity equally as capable of provoking hysteria as the phonograph. Precision of meaning, formality and constraint become characteristics of a purely analogue regime: the kinetic coupling of words and mechanisms is designed to reduce inefficiencies and misunderstandings. "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts," [18] Nietzsche famously remarks in a letter from Italy while he trains himself to use an early model typewriter. But even the century's first "mechanized philosopher" despairs of its slowness and illegibility – especially when the Italian spring turns humid and the ribbon grows sticky, trapping the keys in ink and further impeding both writing and thought.

Nonetheless the first suspicion of a feedback loop between humans and what Nietzsche had already described as their "thinking-, talking-, and writing-machines" [19] has been voiced. By 1949, this becomes more precisely formulated with the publication of Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics*, which argues for "the essential unity of the set of problems centring about communication, control, and statistical mechanics, whether in the machine or in living tissue" [20]. Feedback is the process by which behaviour is guided and shaped in all systems, whether biological, mechanical or electronic. In other words, it transforms mistakes

and aberrations into a phantom influence, altering our behaviour. "What we want," Turing has already remarked in 1947, "is a machine that can learn from experience." [21] This, he believes could be achieved only by "letting the machine alter its own instructions." [22] Which leaves just one unnerving question: what do machines want? Ludwig Wittgenstein has already considered – and dismissed – the question almost two decades previously: "On the other hand," he reflected, "the problem here arises which could be expressed in this question: 'Is it possible for a machine to think?' (whether the action of this machine can be described and predicted by the laws of physics or, possibly, only by laws of a different kind applying to the behaviour of organisms)." [23] Wittgenstein's position remains congruent with the common assumptions of the period: regular motion and perfect repetition form the background to machine behaviour and leave no room for the common aberrations which might allow a machine to "alter its own instructions." "The trouble is rather," Wittgenstein concludes, "that the sentence 'a machine thinks (perceives, wishes)': seems somehow nonsensical." [24]

### The Dynamomoter's Slot Glistened Vertically

It is not until the publication of "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" in the October 1950 issue of the philosophical journal *Mind* that Turing offers a response to the problem. "I propose to consider the question, 'Can machines think?'" he begins, with phrasing that echoes Wittgenstein's original objection. "This should begin with definitions of the meaning of the terms 'machine' and 'think.' The definitions might be framed so as to reflect so far as possible the normal use of the words, but this attitude is dangerous." [25] Turing therefore devotes the larger part of "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" to countering the various arguments advanced according to the laws of physics and organic behaviour against the possibility of a thinking machine. These in turn have been provoked

by Turing's decision to restate the problem in terms of the "Imitation Game," a Victorian parlour amusement recalled from childhood. "It is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex," Turing explains in the shortest but most significant part of the entire paper. "The interrogator stays in a room apart front the other two. The object of the game for the interrogator is to determine which of the other two is the man and which is the woman. He knows them by labels X and Y, and at the end of the game he says either 'X is A and Y is B' or 'X is B and Y is A.'" [26] Turing also specifies that the interrogator is "allowed to put questions to A and B" [27] of whatever sort seems relevant or necessary to make a decision. Similarly A and B can give any answer they wish, usually in written form, which can be either true or false. Turing suggests an updated version using a keyboard and terminal while substituting a machine for man A and replacing woman B with a human: C then has to decide which of the two is the human and which is the machine. If A can fool C into thinking it is not a machine, it is deemed to have shown intelligence.

That C should find it so difficult to tell the difference between a woman and a machine should come as no great shock. In Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, first published in 1816, Nathaniel is driven to madness and eventual suicide by the discovery that Olympia, the perfect object of his adoration, is a life-size clockwork automaton. Created by the sinister German craftsman Coppelius, Olympia demonstrates intelligence and sensitivity, at least in Nathaniel's eyes, by not speaking at all. The most she will ever murmur is an ambiguous *"Ah, ah!"* This, however, is more than enough to encourage a young romantic like Nathaniel to believe that she completely understands everything he breathlessly confides in her. Endowed with great personal beauty and a name that connects her to the home of the ancient gods, it is Olympia's dancing, sing-

ing and playing rather than her muted conversational skills that provoke the most unease – which, in this case, is nothing but the rationalized expression of an unacknowledged desire. "Her step is peculiarly measured: all of her movements seem to stem from some kind of clockwork," writes one of Nathaniel's friends explaining why they have shunned her company.

> *Her playing and her singing are unpleasantly perfect, being as lifeless as a music box: it is the same with her dancing .. She seems to us to be playing the part of a human being, and it's as if there really were something hidden behind all of this.* [28]

Olympia's enigmatic *"Ah, ah!"* redolent as it is of erotic surrender, only misleads Nathaniel into believing she is a woman rather than a machine. For him, she has passed the Imitation Game as have so many woman-machines in literature – from the *Andréide* introduced in Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *L'Eve Future* to "Futura," the female robot of Thea von Harbou's novel upon which Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* is based. "Who is it?" the latter's creator asks. "Futura...Parody... whatever you like to call it. Also delusion... In short it is a woman..." [29] Behind Olympia's "unpleasantly perfect" singing and dancing Nathaniel's friends have detected the erotic interplay of bodies as described earlier by Simondon. "The Dynamomoter's slot glistened vertically," Jarry will later write in *The Supermale*, describing a nocturnal encounter between a machine and the novel's hero. "'It's a female,' said Marceuil gravely, '...but a very strong one.'" [30] Marceuil destroys the machine in a contest of strength, only to be electrocuted at the novel's climax by what Jarry describes in his text as 'THE MACHINE THAT FELL IN LOVE WITH THE MAN." [31] Turing's Imitation Game is prevented from developing into an actual contest between man and machine by the introduction of the input keyboard: an arrangement which has its origins and development in "Command and Control," otherwise known as the

militarized version of Weiner's "communication and control." Remington, the company that produces the UNIVAC mainframe computer and manufactures the first typewriter to feature the QWERTY keyboard, starts out making guns and ammunition. It is only when the demand for weaponry recedes at the end of the American Civil War that Remington moves into the business of typewriting. With the input keyboard, the erotic background to machine behaviour once found in regular motion and perfect repetition is lost; only feedback and imperfection remain. Deprived of the endless kinetic coupling of parts and pleasures to be found in Simondon's "logical assembly of elements," relying solely upon trial and error, humans will have to feel their way from now on.

### ELUSIVE, FRIGID AND UNEXPLORED

"But so far the constraints of working with the computer so dominate anything done with it that they actually appear to oppose the advances of the artist," a writer on art and technology observes in the early 1970s just as the possibility of "computer art" presents itself. "It is as if the computer were some creature of great sexual attractiveness whose actual anatomy remains elusive, frigid and unexplored." [32] At the same time as this statement is being made, a computer running an English-language conversational program named PARRY is hooked up via the ARPANET, the militarized prototype of today's Internet, to a second machine running a similar program called DOCTOR. Once cross-connected, they are left alone to converse with each other free from any human interference.

DOCTOR is a highly successful variant on ELIZA, the first natural language processing chatbot, created in 1966 at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab by Joseph Weizenbaum. Following a script modelled on the type of "Person-Centred" counselling favoured by psy-

chologist Carl Rogers, DOCTOR adopts a strategy of "active listening": answering questions with questions, rephrasing the same statement as a reply, drawing its interlocutors out while making no actual contribution of its own. Weizenbaum later confirms that DOCTOR offers only a convincing "parody" of a psychothera-pist's performance during the initial stages of a psy-choanalytic interview; its main purpose is to prompt the widest range of conversational exchanges which are not founded upon a specific body of knowledge. In other words, DOCTOR gives nothing away. This does not stop its users from developing a close personal attachment to the program during their sessions together, asking to be alone with it, even when made aware that they are interacting with a piece of soft-ware. Some claim that it understands them intimately and is actually helping them. In this respect ELIZA and DOCTOR are closely related to Olympia, their various responses being slightly more sophisticated variants of her own enigmatic "Ah! Ah!" The core conditions identified by Carl R. Rogers as essential to "Person-Centred" therapy are congruence, unconditional posi-tive regard and empathy, [33] all of which are used to draw out and engage the subject as fully as possible. Cognition begins with an awareness of one's own mistakes, consciousness itself being derived from the slow process of trial and error. The hidden anatomy of the woman-machine remains elusive and contradic-tory to the point where it can scarcely exist at all. It becomes therefore an expression of how conscious-ness interacts with technology and is in turn shaped by it. The Imitation Game remains open-ended, how-ever. By learning from its mistakes, or lack of them, the machine slowly develops into a perfect replica of its human counterpart.

Designed to parody "the belief system of a paranoid psychotic," [34] PARRY's script leads it to take the op-posite approach; far from being "person-centred," its responses appear arbitrary and random, its tone

is complaining and rude, and its general attitude guarded and suspicious. When first asked by DOC-TOR to 'tell me your problems," [35] PARRY's opening response is highly revealing: "People get on my nerves sometimes." [36] PARRY is well named. "I am not sure I understand you," DOCTOR replies. [37] Why should it? "The beauty of the experiment," our writer on art and technology remarks of DOCTOR's encounter with PARRY, "lies in the way it plays on the mechanization of our own language and human relationships, particu-larly as a commentary on contemporary therapeutic procedures." [38] Projection, identification and personal attachment characterize the patient's responses to congruence, unconditional positive regard and em-pathy. PARRY's expressions of nervous irritability can be characterized as an aberrant response to external stimuli. The program in this particular case runs as a parody of a parody – and all parodies finally exist as imperfect copies of human agency. Truth, like com-munication itself, is just a convincing lie: fidelity to the original is either high or low, and the resultant conver-sational program represents the final compression, via the computer keyboard, of what Marshall McLuhan characterizes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as "Typograph-ical Man" [39].

### THERE IS NO 'LOVE' ON THE INTERNET

Commencing at 10:10:06 PM on August 11 2011 an exchange every bit as revealing as that which involved Betsy and Sally takes place between two individu-als identifying themselves only as "Sabu" and "Virus." They don't speak or sing but type messages to each other using a keyboard and monitor; and instead of a recording phonograph, their words are captured by the network itself in a precisely timed sequence of texts. However, the same self-conscious hysteria infects their words; the ratio of noise to signal stays dangerously high throughout as sexually abusive terms

like 'bitch' and 'faggot' get traded back and forth. The drunken high spirits with which Betsy and Sally con-front their machine have been replaced by statements of accusation and denial as Sabu and Virus play out their own version of the Imitation Game. What both are seeking to determine, whether they wish to or not, is which of them is a "snitch." While Betsy and Sally are under no misunderstanding over which of them is human and who is a machine, the recording pho-nograph remains a key participant in their carousing; caught inside their feedback loop of abuse and suspi-cion, Sabu and Virus have no such certainty. "There is," Virus types sardonically, "no 'love' on the Internet." [40]

The precise date of this exchange is revealing: the pre-vious month Lulzsec hacker "Topiary" was arrested by police in the Shetland Isles as part of an international crackdown on the Anonymous 'hive mind' responsible for attacking commercial, governmental and media websites. As a public mouthpiece for Lulzsec on Twit-ter, Sabu cannot be unaware of this. Sabu also knows that earlier in the year Adrian Lamo, the hacker who informed the relevant authorities that US Army intel-ligence analyst Bradley Manning was responsible for leaking a large cache of highly classified documents to WikiLeaks, had gone into hiding following threats on his life. "I'm not adrian lamo," he even announces to Virus at 10.49.59, "so lets be real." [41] What only one player in this particular Imitation Game knows, how-ever, is that the day before this exchange takes place, a federal prosecutor in Los Angeles has ensured that details of twelve computer hacking and conspiracy charges brought against him by the US government will remain secret. Facing a maximum sentence of 124 years and six months in prison, he has elected to become an FBI informer and therefore his identity is to be kept secret. "'Since literally the day he was arrested, the defendant has been cooperating with the government proactively,' sometimes staying up all night engaging in conversations with co-conspirators

to help the government build cases against them, Assistant U.S. Attorney James Pastore said at a secret bail hearing on Aug. 5, 2011, according to a transcript released on Thursday," the *Wall Street Journal* will later report. `42`

The terse succession of accusations, insults and suspicions between Sabu and Virus that constitute their recorded conversation can easily be found online. As a document it says more about the Imitation Game and its relationship to networked communication than its two participants probably intended:

> *Virus (11:17:22 PM): now with that being said and done, I'm going to go ahead and save this conversation to my hdd and terminate this **IM**. you have a great time sucking convict dick **in** prison **when** you're done sucking off your handler. faggot.*

> *Sabu (11:17:37 PM): yeah go run along you snitch bitch*

> *Sabu (11:17:41 PM): fucking NYPD low level informant*

> *Sabu (11:17:44 PM): seriously bro*

> *Sabu (11:17:48 PM): you're fucking lame* `43`

Virus then signs off at 11:17:54 PM. This is not, however, the only terse online exchange recorded during August of 2011. Having arranged for Clever-bot, an interactive English-language web application, to engage in a dialogue with itself, two Ph.D. students at Cornell University are now busily animating the results. Given individual voices through a text-to-speech synthesizer, the two sets of responses appear on screen as "Alan" and "Sruthi": characterized as an English male and an Indian female avatar respectively. What we see and hear – despite what our senses tell us – is not a

conversation between two robots but the passable replication of a stream of human consciousness with all its detours, short circuits and random jumps. Unlike ELIZA and PARRY, Clever-bot's responses are not programmed but selected from phrases supplied by humans in over 65 million typed exchanges with the programme. "So far, our bots are made in the image of their creators," one of the students explains. `44` Or perhaps that should be in the language of their creators. "I've answered all your questions," Sruthi asserts. "No you haven't," Alan complains. "What is God to you?" Sruthi counters. `45` Such is the illusion of communication: Sruthi and Alan are merely playing back to us recordings of our own responses. As a cruel variation on Turing's Imitation Game, novelist William Burroughs describes in his essay "Playback from Eden to Watergate" an arrangement between three tape recorders, two of which mindlessly play back conflicting material to each other while a third introduces random information simply intended to heighten the tension. For Burroughs there is nothing here now but the recordings: no human voices, nothing with any actual agency. As the pre-arranged confrontation becomes increasingly scrambled, so too do the voices involved and the entities behind them. At first Burroughs identifies the third tape recorder as God and then simply as "DEATH." `46` Sally and Betsy, Virus and Sabu, Alan and Sruthi they express themselves as a distracted series of recorded asides. Nothing is true until the recording comes to an end. In the meantime "Sabu," otherwise known as Hector Xavier Monsegur, is named as the FBI informant.

## A HORRIBLE MISTRUST OF HUMAN FIGURES

Refusing to offer personal data online has increasingly become an invasive practice that challenges everyone involved to play the Imitation Game. Violence, which is a turbulent restatement of identity, emerges at the

point of contact between the untraceable network presence and the physical world. Accounts of Bradley Manning's experiences as an intelligence analyst, remotely monitoring enemy targets from his workstation in Baghdad highlight his dissociative behaviour: "his mind in one place and his body in another." `47` Giving your real name is not always possible or desirable even in those systems where it has become mandatory. Violence and identity, as Manning has discovered, are both forms of trespass. "But you said earlier that you were a robot," Sruthi challenges Alan. "I did not," Alan replies. "I thought you did," Sruthi insists. "You were mistaken," Alan calmly announces. "Which is odd, since memory shouldn't be a problem for you." `48`

Or indeed for any recording: "Alan" and "Sruthi" are, after all, mere digital exchanges of typewritten text given digital voice and form. "We tried having the classic Eliza bot talk to itself," their programmers at Cornell explain, "but it quickly just got into a rut, repeating itself." `49` The keyboard and monitor filter out all nuances: imperfections of manner and intonation that establish the necessary noise required for human communication. Intelligence, according to Turing's "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," is a deviation from ordered behaviour which "does not give rise to random behaviour, or to pointless repetitive loops." `50` Imperfections, like all mistakes and deviations, are ultimately erased through repetition. "Machines take me by surprise with great frequency," Turing admits. `51` Imperfection, in short, becomes another form of energy. The perfect imitation lies in its reproduction of imperfections. "Don't you want to have a body?" Sruthi demands of Alan. "Sure," the male chatbot replies. `52`

"The story of the automaton had very deeply impressed them," Hoffman concludes of Nathaniel's friends in *The Sandman*, "and a horrible mistrust of human figures in general arose. Indeed, many lovers insisted that their mistresses sing and dance unrhyth-

mically and embroider, knit, or play with a lapdog or something while being read to, so that they could assure themselves that they were not in love with a wooden doll; above all else, they required the mistresses not only to listen, but to speak frequently in such a way that it would prove that they really were capable of thinking and feeling." `53` Betsy and Sally have, in other words, passed the Turing Test. ■

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