



Evental Aesthetics  
**Aesthetic Intersections 4**  
Vol. 10 (2021)

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An Exploration of Nonhuman  
Perspectives of the Territory*  
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Carolyn Kirschner, detail from *Data Storm, 2003 (Conflicting Data)*. Digital render, 2018. Original image on p. 13.

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# Remote Sensing the Arctic

An Exploration of Nonhuman Perspectives of the Territory

Carolyn Kirschner<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Remote sensing is the acquisition of information about a place or phenomenon without making physical contact, allowing for data collection in dangerous or inaccessible regions. In the middle of an ongoing geopolitical dispute over the Arctic Ocean, where data has become the currency of sovereignty, this technology is proving indispensable. Probes, sensors, and satellites are deployed in growing numbers, tasked with harvesting data and metadata from the seafloor in order to substantiate overlapping and conflicting territorial claims. They have become synthetic species of the polar ecosystems, a vast network of sensors that transmits glimpses of the fluid territory back to stable ground.

In this context, I explore questions of proximity, abstraction, and artificiality. How are ecologies constructed and experienced when they are mediated by machine senses? What is included and what is left out? What alternative, expanded versions of the landscape might emerge?

My research and visual work grapple with these questions by seeking out the gaps and glitches between the physical terrain and its digital alter egos—a slippery space I call the *algorithmic wilderness*. From this vantage point, I consider how sovereign agendas and capitalist enterprises currently distort the landscape, and I use environmental data extracted from the Arctic Ocean to experiment with alternative materialities and visual languages—foregrounding nonhuman senses and non-Western perspectives.

## Keywords

Remote Sensing, Geopolitics, Arctic, Borders, Nonhuman

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## Data War

Remote sensing is the acquisition of information about an object or phenomenon without making physical contact with it, allowing for data collection in remote and inaccessible areas across the globe. Satellites, probes, and sonar and radar systems transmit sights and senses from these edge lands, pulling distant terrains into contemporary political, economic, and ecological frameworks.

This is how parts of the Tibetan mountains, too steep to climb, have been digitally modeled; untapped mineral deposits have been located in the subsoils of Chile; the remaining biomass of Borneo's rainforests has been calculated; and hurricanes forming in the middle of the Atlantic are detected.

But these attempts to expand the human sphere of influence simultaneously create an expanding realm of nonhuman senses. With this ongoing research and design project, I consider these elusive worlds emerging in their wake as we increasingly rely on technologies to encounter distant landscapes. What does it mean to outsource the way we see and sense the planet?

In the Arctic, remote sensors are tasked with delineating sovereign borders as part of an ongoing territorial dispute. The scramble to claim the 1.1-million-square-mile area surrounding the North Pole—currently international waters—is fueled by the promises of global warming: access to troves of untapped resources below the seabed and control over new shipping routes through the thawing sea ice. Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the US are all vying for a slice of the Arctic Ocean (Durham University 2020). Under guidelines set out by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), nations are to substantiate their overlapping territorial claims with an assortment of seismic, geologic and topographic data, in the hopes of proving that the portions of seabed in question are a natural continuation of their continental shelf and therefore “rightfully” theirs (United Nations 1982). What results from the situation is an unusual type of international conflict, in which authority is wielded not through the brutal use of military force, but through the possession of information. Data has become the currency of sovereignty.

As the Arctic remains one of the least accessible regions in the world—a stark landscape of water and ice, perpetually moving, melting, and reforming—the harsh conditions and absence of any fixed land to adhere to means that data collection is almost entirely outsourced to remote sensing technologies. Satellites monitor wildlife (Cilulko et al. 2012) and track icebergs (Smirnov et al. 2019), air guns blast seismic pulses to map undersea

topography (Gisiner 2016), probes equipped with biochemical sensors float in the drift ice (Argo 2016), weather balloons collect atmospheric data (Hall 2019), and hydrophones record underwater sounds (Ocean Conservation Research 2020). Even narwhals are being used as remote sensors, fitted with radio transmitters to collect data from beneath the ice sheets, in areas otherwise impossible for researchers to access (Brennan 2017).

Previously ongoing scientific pursuits in the Arctic have been amplified by the need for data in light of current geopolitical tensions, leaving national research institutes tasked with the pursuit of sovereign agendas. While media narratives praise this setup for promising a nonviolent dispute, instead outsourcing decision making to purportedly objective and reasonable scientific processes, the reality of remote sensing in the Arctic is far more complicated (Anderson and Dombey 2008).

## More Data Does Not Equal More Reality

Fittingly, the majority of sensing instruments in use today emerged from military applications spanning the First World War and the Cold War (Cloud 2002). Although now deployed less conspicuously for techno-scientific exploration, they remain entwined in global conflict. Pixels may have shrunk and resolutions improved over time, allowing for increasingly *detailed* representations of global terrains, but to assume the imagery generated from remote sensors is now *equivalent* to the landscape would be a mistake.

Data and metadata harvested from complex ecologies and natural phenomena is inherently incomplete, only ever representing snapshots of a vastly more extensive system. Curtailed by computing power, the limited number and reach of remote sensors, and a limited understanding of polar ecosystems, a need arises for prioritization and decision making: to decide what is worth recording, and what should be left out. The whole of the source material is simply too large to capture. Single droplets of seawater, for example—each with a unique temperature and salinity, home to thousands of plankton and microbial species, interacting as currents, accumulating as waves, freezing as drift ice—are entangled in seemingly infinite micro and macro interdependencies.

By comparison, their digital alter egos, reconstructed from data, are strikingly stunted versions of the originals, encased as they are in neatly bounded models with strategically isolated inputs and outputs. Patchworks of information collected from the physical terrain rely on abstraction and interpolation between data points to fill the gaps. Raw data is funneled through a process of refinement—corrected, organized,

optimized, and averaged. At each step of the way, the digitally fabricated terrain is removed further from its physical counterpart, stripped of cumbersome complexities. Reality is edited and post-produced. Consider a case in point: in the 1980s, a large hole in the ozone layer appeared above Antarctica. Although NASA had been continuously recording atmospheric data, all data points that indicated these drastic changes to the ozone layer were falsely classified as outliers, and consequently discarded. “In this case, reality itself was an outlier and assumed to be an error” (Brain 2018, 156).

Ultimately, what data is collected and how it is processed is determined by what is considered typical or atypical, important or peripheral. In the context of the Arctic dispute, these decisions are driven by geopolitical agendas at play: variables entwined with resource extraction, trade routes, and the delineation of borders are foregrounded—in everything from models of geological sublayers to iceberg surveillance. The rest is captured at lower resolution or not at all.

But more is at stake than a simple act of omission: discrepancies between different nations’ models of the one and the same area reveal attempts to manipulate the terrain in their favor (Holmes 2008)—“to hide, to scan, to camouflage, to self-display and to trick the world into seeing things not as they are but as they could be or should be,” in an attempt to make their claim more viable (Bratton 2019, 20). As remote sensors piece together a carefully curated digital landscape, commodifying and dividing the land, the seemingly innocuous and purportedly objective visual language of scientific imagery becomes entangled in colonial and capitalist enterprises. So much is lost, altered and edited along the way that remote sensing technologies are not only reading and representing the landscape—they are fabricating it.

## The Algorithmic Wilderness

So what if familiar representations of the Arctic are just one possibility among many? Beyond the restrained and streamlined versions remote sensors are currently used to generate, could peering deeper into the expanding datascape and strange realm of nonhuman senses reveal alternative configurations of polar ecologies?

What if we were to look instead to all the things usually redacted or excluded from the realities that these technologies produce? The things that are too slippery to neatly capture, intentional gaps in the data, areas of low resolution, areas of low priority, and conflicting data points? What

alternative versions of the territory might emerge? Trusted with creating de facto placeholders for the distant terrain, remote sensors are able to delineate the boundaries of reality in the Arctic—and maybe stretch them, too.

I describe this elusive exclusion zone, usually relegated to the fringes of reality, as an *algorithmic wilderness*. It is populated by things that are currently not represented in dominant scientific visualizations, either because

1. they take up too much processing power,
2. they are considered to be irrelevant,
3. they are not understood within current scientific frameworks, or
4. they contradict the singular version of reality predicated by Western science.

Icebergs below a certain size, for example, are not recorded. They would overwhelm computational capacities, and are deemed irrelevant since they present little risk of disrupting shipping routes (Scheick, Enderlin, and Hamilton 2018). The Earth's magnetic field remains a mystery and evades scientific models, which are unable to fully explain or predict changes in it (Witze 2019). Any data points that are considered outliers are deleted, just like indigenous models of reality are discounted from official narratives.

In the process of constructing neatly bounded digital alter egos of the Arctic Ocean, a kind of spillover zone emerges for inconvenient data at odds with dominant agendas. It is the inevitable byproduct of a process which attempts to shoehorn irreducibly complex ecologies into tightly constrained technoscientific frameworks. Whereas prevailing representations of the territory are curtailed by a need to organize and rationalize, the algorithmic wilderness is excessive and strange. Could glimpses of this elusive realm expand and unsettle all too familiar conceptions of the territory? Here, unfiltered and unedited data sets collide, overlapping and contradicting each other, drifting across sediments of discarded information. Surreal creatures emerge, giving form to what is usually overlooked.

Curious what the algorithmic wilderness might look like—what new visual and material languages might emerge—I began generating a series of digital models using remote sensing data extracted from the Arctic Ocean. The resulting creature-like forms (which look like they might be found in the dark depths of the polar sea) each emerge from experiments with—or indeed themselves experiment with—alternative configurations of data, or alternative models of reality, beyond Western logics.

## CREATURE 1: Border Dispute (between Norway and Russia) + Seismic Pulse + Dolphin

The first creature considers the type of data that accumulates in the wake of a border dispute at sea, focusing on a contentious stretch between Norway and Russia near the Lomonosov Ridge in the Arctic Ocean (see figure 1). Nations rely on surveys of seabed topography and subsurface geology to substantiate their territorial claims according to the frameworks set out by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These are generated using air guns towed along the disputed coordinates by research vessels. Floating in the frigid water, they blast loud, pressurized pulses of air into the ocean, which spread and travel through the water column until they hit the seafloor. Here, the loud pulses enter the sandy sediments of the seabed and reflect echoes of the ragged topography back up to the surface—offering clues as to what lies below. This process is called seismic blasting. The resulting maps, surveys, and charts of the undersea landscape are all familiar representations of a border dispute, a growing paper trail that is in keeping with scientific standards and aesthetics.

Omitted from these official records, however, are the incredibly damaging effects of seismic pulses on marine life—from zooplankton to whales and dolphins—as seismic blasts travel underwater for up to 2,500 miles and create some of the loudest sounds in the ocean, sometimes repeated as often as every ten seconds for days, weeks, or months at a time. The relentless noise leaves marine life in distress, and indeed leads to injuries and death, as sound plays an essential role in these organisms' ability to feed, mate, communicate, and avoid predators (Oceana 2020).

Since these data sets—the official documentation of the dispute and its detrimental effects on marine life—are never seen in the same contextual frame, I consider what might exist at their intersection. Perhaps, drifting through the tumultuous depths of the algorithmic wilderness, they might collide and congeal, thereby offering an alternative representation of a border dispute. The latitude and longitude of the border in question form the spine of the computer-generated form. Revolving around it are the waves of a seismic pulse. The resulting form is enveloped in the skin of a dolphin.

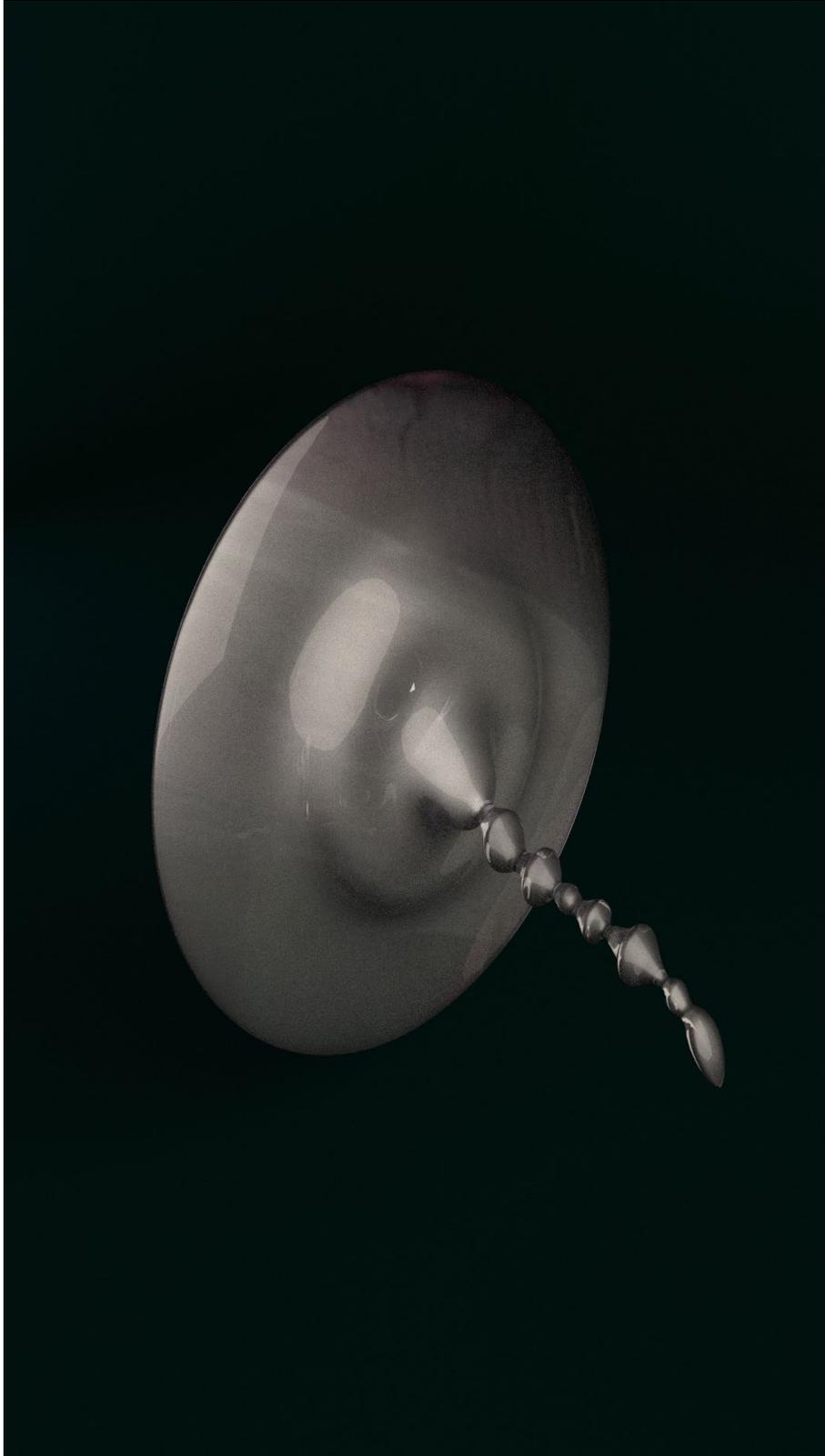


FIGURE 1. “Data Creature 1”: Carolyn Kirschner, *Border Dispute (between Norway & Russia) + Seismic Pulse + Dolphin*. Digital render, 2018.

## CREATURE 2: Seal Migration Routes + Annual Ice Extent + Inuit Sea Goddess

This second creature draws on the logics of indigenous mythology, which—like all other versions of reality that contradict dominant narratives—are relegated to depths of algorithmic wilderness (see figure 2).

The myth of Sedna has taken on many forms, but usually begins with a girl taken out to sea by her father. Following a dispute, he pushes her over the edge of his kayak, leaving her dangling off the sides. As she stubbornly clings on, her fingertips freeze—first turning to ice and then transforming into seals. Her hands become walruses and her forearms become whales. Her body grows a fishtail and sinks to the underworld, where she now commands the mysterious Arctic Ocean. She is the Mistress of the Sea, the mother of all sea life (Laugrand and Oosten 2009).

Flickering between different states of matter, she makes the boundaries between humans, animals, and landscapes impossible to discern. Where Western narratives insist on neat categories and clear delineations, long-standing indigenous oral traditions rely on their inseparability (Cruikshank 2006, 128, 220). Borders between human and nonhuman worlds are permeable in a way that is glaringly at odds with dominant environmental discourse. This leaves the Inuit sea goddess treated as an impossibility, a superstition.

But in the algorithmic wilderness, a collision of data momentarily attests to her existence. A map of seal migration routes across the Barents Sea melds with data describing monthly fluctuations of Arctic ice extent, allowing the shapeshifting goddess to become tangible as multiple states of matter collide.

Where the scientific process relies on strict compartmentalization, focusing on key areas of concern in isolation (with climate scientists tracking ice extent and biologists specializing in seal behaviors), here they merge and accumulate, able to tell different stories than what could be told by either model alone. The resulting sheetlike being is a delicate tangle of data, a computer-generated form that extrudes a two-dimensional surface model of seal routes upwards and downwards, according to corresponding fluctuations in monthly sea ice. Here, it is the framework or reality within the myth that gives form to this combination of data. A creature emerges that unsettles anthropocentric delineations of rigid boundaries between humans, nonhumans, and landscapes.



FIGURE 2. “Data Creature 2”: Carolyn Kirschner, *Seal Migration Routes + Annual Ice Extent + Inuit Sea Goddess*. Digital render, 2018.

### CREATURE 3: Data Storm, 2003 (Conflicting Data)

The third creature is made of multiple, conflicting data sets of a magnetic storm. It considers the variations, inaccuracies, outliers, and deleted data points that accumulate as remote sensing instruments probe their surroundings (see figure 3).

Magnetic storms are caused by surges of solar wind: electrically charged flares and effervescent ejections of plasma emitted by the sun that eventually crash into the Earth's atmosphere and disturb the outer portion of its magnetic field. The sudden turbulence generates electric currents, which in turn creates more intense magnetic fluctuations: a storm (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2020). Although magnetic storms are most common at higher latitudes, where they become visible as the northern lights, painting the sky in ethereal greens and purples, they can drastically interfere with electrical infrastructure on a global scale, often inflicting serious damage (Andrews 2019).

In order to anticipate these storms, magnetometers are tasked with measuring localized fluctuations in magnetic field strength. These instruments are highly sensitive and require careful calibration, often returning slightly divergent data of a single magnetic occurrence due to variations or errors across instruments in hardware, location, and programming. Usually—as is standard for the scientific process—this messy, raw data is then subject to a process of refinement: of calculating averages, deleting outliers, and interpolating information in order to streamline findings into a single, more decisive version of events.

But in the algorithmic wilderness, a luminescent, asymmetrical disc gives form to these contradictions. Constructed from local magnetic data collected near the Arctic Circle, it combines conflicting data sets of a particularly violent storm in 2003. Three graphs, each charting magnetic field strength over time, are fanned out around a common origin. By digitally interpolating the spaces “in between,” an intricate form begins to take shape. Variations in its furrowed ridges tell of errors and inconsistencies. As the three contradictory data sets jostle to occupy the same space at the same time, the creature is able to contain multiple versions of the event, or even multiple realities at once—thus bringing the data into a dialogue that is at odds with the singular reality predicated by Western science.

Entering the algorithmic wilderness is a chance for alternative materialities and visual languages to emerge. Data extracted from the polar landscape can be reconfigured in many ways. It can be used to categorize and organize, and to draw up borders and plan shipping routes for pervasive geopolitical schemes. But outside of familiar models and metrics, the very



FIGURE 3. “Data Creature 3”: Carolyn Kirschner, *Data Storm, 2003 (Conflicting Data)*. Digital render, 2018.

same data, clustered in unusual configurations, can reveal more unsettling versions of the landscape. Realities multiply in this strange world of bits and bytes—suited to an Arctic landscape that is itself multiplicitous and fluid, and which slips through the rigid frameworks designed to contain it.

## The Wobbling Pole

One such rigid framework: the coordinate grid. Its introduction to Western cartography in the fifteenth century enveloped the planet in an evenly spaced grid of latitudes and longitudes. This improved navigation and fueled a dogged determination to fill the remaining (and now conspicuously) blank spaces on a newly finite and uniform globe (Dalché 2007, 327).

The North Pole, too, moved into the spotlight—as the theoretical point at the top of the globe where this planetary grid converges. This spurred a race to conquer the pole, with the help of indigenous populations who were of course long familiar with these “newly discovered” territories. This despite the fact that the pole itself, for which there was no word in indigenous languages, remained an elusive construct of the Western imagination—leaving Robert Peary’s Inuit assistants allegedly astounded to discover that after “travelling for days over ice and snow, there was nothing [there at the North Pole] except more ice and snow” (Harper 2009).

And yet, despite being geologically entirely indistinguishable from its surroundings, its symbolic value continues to prove unwavering. The current territorial claims of Canada, Russia, and Denmark all include the pole (United Nations 2020). Russia even went as far as planting a flag on the seabed in 2007, 14,000 feet beneath the surface, using a miniature robotic submarine (Chivers 2007). To this day, it fuels the ambitions of nation states, with a successful claim suggesting some kind of symbolic mastery of the far north.

This fixed and singular North Pole, however, does not exist. Defined as the point where the Earth’s axis of rotation meets the surface, it may have once been believed to be fixed relative to the surface. But it has since been discovered that the axis wobbles slightly, dragging the North Pole with it (Casselman 2008). What the coordinate system so rigidly attempts to fix in place is undermined by the fact that the pole is perpetually wandering across the Earth’s surface within a range of a few meters. It exists in multiples and continues to evade Western classification schemata, which mistakenly tend to think of territories as solid and containable—as somehow lending themselves to be neatly described and organized with lines on a map.

The ongoing Arctic dispute operates under the same assumption, using remote sensors to tie sovereign borders to geological features with pinpoint precision, in a race to divide the Arctic. Meanwhile, sea levels are rising, continental plates are shifting, and the geological sublayers of the seabed are in perpetual motion. Sovereign borders start shifting with the layers of sand, silt, and clay they are tied to, sliding unpredictably across the terrain. Ultimately, the more instruments flock to the polar region, and the more data that is transmitted, the more precarious any sense of stability becomes. Vast sensor networks and floods of data reveal a slippery terrain that is in constant motion and that contradicts Western cartographic logics.

And in the process of revealing the landscape's slipperiness, remote sensors are *altering* it, too. A strange hybrid landscape is taking shape—part synthetic, part natural, full of sensors and in constant motion. Assemblages of aluminum, silicon, steel, foam, iridium, and rubber become a new technological species of polar ecosystems. As indigenous populations have long known, the Arctic is sentient and “equipped with a sense of hearing, sight and smell” (Cruikshank 2006, 229).

Could expanded access to the sensory capacities of the sentient landscape, the sidelined and censored fringes conveniently relegated to the algorithmic wilderness, offer more complete and unsettling experiences of the Arctic—beyond Western paradigms and human senses? As remote sensors now outnumber humans in the world's most inaccessible regions, how might they expand the way we see and sense landscapes? The instruments are able to confront us with the relentless fluidity of the landscape, unsettling illusions of fixity, borders, maps, and surveys—which in turn calls into question broader constructs underpinning resource extraction, tourism, and nationalism.

## A Landscape of False Information

Incidentally, the earliest maps of the poles were also drawn up from a distance, long before explorers were able to reach these remote regions. Like historical predecessors for remote sensing, they were based on scientific observations of their time, made from afar.

Speculations about Antarctica, for instance, also known as the hypothetical continent *Terra Australis*, date back to Roman times and were founded on the guiding principles of symmetry and equilibrium—with the conclusion that the landmasses in the northern hemisphere necessitate a vast continent in the South as a planetary counterweight (see figure 4).



FIGURE 4. Antarctica as Featured in the World’s First Modern Atlas.

Abraham Ortelius, “Typus Orbis Terrarum” (24.6 × 48.3 cm), in Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Gilles Coppens de Diest: Antwerp, 1570). Public domain.

Antarctica was featured in the world’s first modern atlas as early as 1601 (Oceanwide Expeditions 2018) but remained unseen until 1820 (Armstrong 1971).

Similarly, the first maps of the Arctic were published in the seventeenth century, long before any Western expedition reached the North Pole. The Earth’s magnetic field led Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator to envision a colossal magnetic mountain near the pole, while vicious currents along the shores of Northern Canada indicated the existence of four large islands surrounding the pole, separated by channels of water which meet in the middle in a reverse whirlpool (see figure 5) (Princeton Visual Materials 1595).

Over time, the Arctic and circumpolar regions were more accurately charted, with the help of transits, sextants, telescopes, chronometers, and prismatic compasses (Cruikshank 2006, 229). Representations of the Arctic multiplied, superseding one another as the contours of the terrain were gradually unveiled. The introduction of remote sensing technologies in the 1970s, in turn, added new layers to the landscape, extruding it upwards



FIGURE 5. Mercator's first map of the Arctic.

Gerhard Mercator, "Septentrionalium Terrarum Descriptio" (engraving with hand coloring on paper, 39.4 × 36.8 cm, 1595). Public domain.

and downwards, with models of atmospheres, currents, underwater topographies, and subterranean worlds.

These vast datascares allowed for more complete understandings of the region. But to this day, the Earth's magnetic field remains a blind spot in our reality. Unlike animals and instruments, we have no natural instinct for it—and no matter how much data is gathered, scientific models are unable to explain or accurately predict changes to it. Mercator's magnetic mountain might have turned out to be a fantastical creation, but scientists are unable to offer alternatives—beyond a suspicion that magnetic fluctuations are linked to turbulence in the Earth's liquid iron core (Witze 2019).

And yet, we have constructed entire realities around the mysterious electromagnetic forces. Planetary infrastructures, from GPS to national

borders, communications, consumer electronics, smartphone compasses, shipping and air traffic, satellites, and sensors all depend upon it. They organize the globe into a here and a there, and are able to pinpoint locations and orient flows of information, people, and goods. But they need to be constantly recalibrated to account for the moving magnetic pole, the universal reference point that underpins all navigation systems. And while the North Pole wobbles within a range of a few meters (Battersby 2006), the Magnetic Pole has wandered around 700 miles in the twentieth century alone (Robinson 2009, 65)—leaving geophysicists playing a constant game of catch up. With the help of remote sensing data, they plot paths and timelines, intent on charting the invisible forcefield while making estimates of its future trajectory.

But it continues to evade capture: like in early 2019, when the magnetic pole inexplicably sped up and veered off its predicted course. Coinciding with the US government shutdown, shuttered national research institutes were unable to locate it for several weeks (Wei-Haas 2019). As simply as that, a single swell inside the Earth's liquid crust exposed the shaky foundations many human worlds are built upon—momentarily unraveling global infrastructures and any delusions of control, of having conquered the planet, and of being above (and outside of) neatly contained constructs of nature. We are at the whim of the Earth's magnetic field, of mysterious and erratic electromagnetic waves beyond human perception.

It leaves in its wake a growing pile of human errors, false predictions, and miscalculations. Discredited models of the magnetic field are hastily discarded, left to accumulate in the algorithmic wilderness. It's like a digital spillover zone. Here, a very different configuration of the magnetic field takes shape. This computer-generated piece (see figure 6), constructed from data, makes these past versions tangible, imagining them congealed into a strange topography. The coordinate data of the recently predicted path, considered credible until the pole's sharp derailing, meets the magnetic mountain from Mercator's first map of the Arctic, which was accompanied at the time by (pseudo)scientific descriptions of the dimensions and materiality of the elusive mountain. It is a landscape of false information, a chronology of once-accepted realities that have since been proven false. And it is bound to continue growing—building up over time like an ice core, but a cross-section of human misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Confronted with this tangible buildup of slipups, any current grasp on reality suddenly seems tenuous too. The vast networks of remote sensors that envelop the planet might, at first glance, suggest a total human mastery over the natural world. But in fact they lay bare the fragility of these

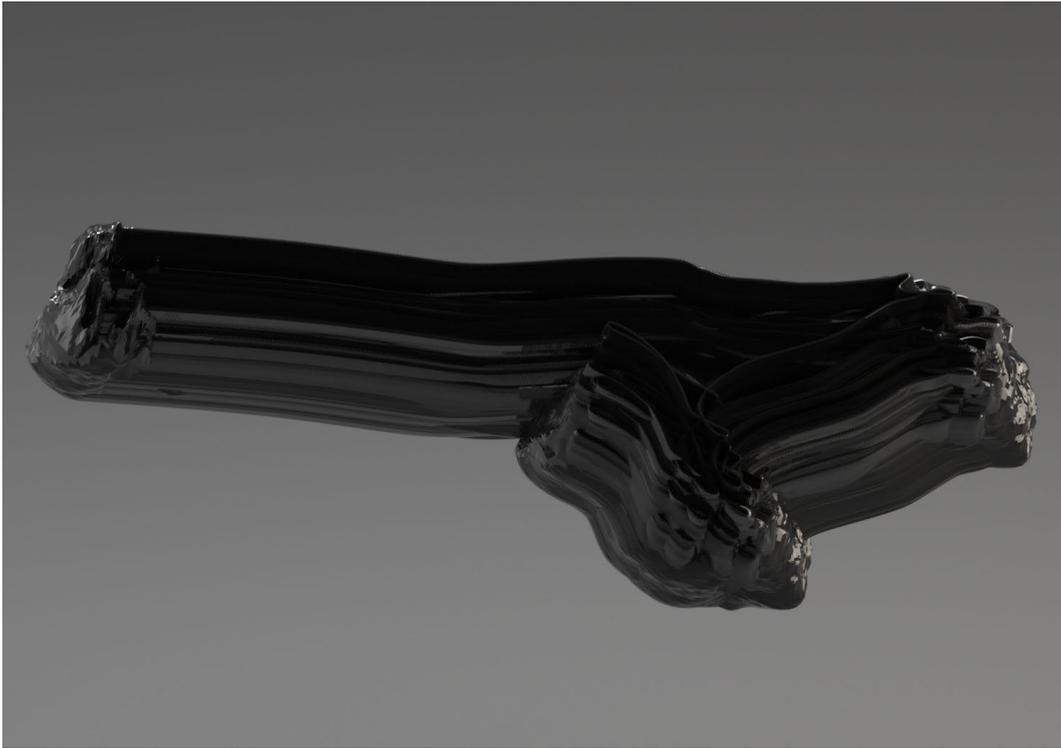


FIGURE 6. Carolyn Kirschner, *A Landscape of False Information*. Digital render, 2019.

hierarchies. Perhaps this is a chance to consider how remote sensors might unravel relationships between humans and ecologies entirely.

## Blurry Borders and Boundaries

Ultimately, the instruments may be deployed with the intent of organizing the landscape, but in fact they expose its inability to be organized—often making the slippery terrain even slipperier. Satellites, for instance, only recognize ships if they are larger than twenty pixels—and misidentify smaller ships as waves (Corbane et al. 2010). Elaborate wave formations, in turn, are occasionally misidentified as ships (Heiselberg and Heiselberg 2017). Boundaries between what is territory, technology, human, and animal become blurry through the eyes of remote sensors.

Polar bears are equally elusive. Their dense coat absorbs portions of the electromagnetic spectrum, making them invisible to infrared cameras tasked with wildlife observation (Preciado 2002). Their shadows might be their only trace. As remote sensors offer new ways of seeing, sensing, and smelling complex ecologies, how might this begin to infiltrate human



FIGURE 7. Carolyn Kirschner, *Rug in the Shape of the Shadow of a Polar Bear*, 2020. Semitransparent urethane sheet, 200 × 200 cm. Photograph: Andrew Gibbs.

spaces and value systems? Figure 7, a rug in the shape of the shadow of a polar bear, brought into a domestic setting, is like a hunting trophy from a wider reality. The translucent rug is made to look as if it itself is a shadow on the ground, an elusive fragment from the algorithmic wilderness. It makes tangible expanded versions of species that emerges in the wake of remote sensors. Unlike Western classification schemes, which rely on the confines of skin and fur to define where an animal begins and ends, machine senses stretch those boundaries to include entanglements and exchanges with their surroundings—like a polar bear’s shadow. Although as the effects of global warming are likely to bring the species to extinction within the next eighty years, the polar bear’s shadow might one day be the only piece of it left (Dickie 2020).

It’s clear that the inner workings of remote sensors are glaringly incompatible with scientific categories and classifications. No matter the technological advances, whether in processing power or in resolution, they are different ways of looking at the world. The Arctic blurs and blends through the eyes of machines, which turns it into an assemblage of pixels with no clear beginnings or ends. Being able to see the Arctic Ocean through nonhuman eyes is not only a chance to recalibrate contrived borders and

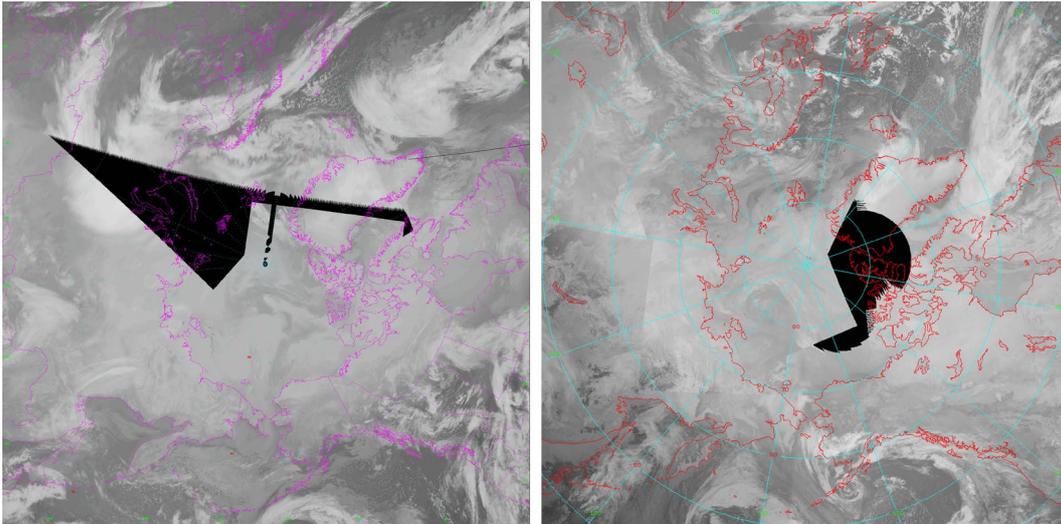


FIGURE 8. Unrecorded gaps in satellite imagery of the North Pole.

Digital images from the Unidata-Wisconsin Datastream Satellite Imagery, July 19–24, 2019. Accessed at Unidata: Data Services and Tools for Geoscience (<https://www.unidata.ucar.edu/data/uniwisc.html>).

boundaries between nations and species, it's also a chance to discover what lies beyond official charts, maps, and surveys of the Arctic. Perhaps the gaps and glitches in familiar representations of the Arctic become entry points to a parallel realm, the rich datascares of the algorithmic wilderness.

Huge, unrecorded gaps in satellite imagery of the North Pole, for example, are commonplace (see figure 8). These strangely shaped, blank regions are the result of reduced satellite density at the poles. They reconfigure every hour, along with the changing constellation of satellites above, leaving behind a growing collection of voids (Unidata 2020). By turning them into three-dimensional scientific specimen (see figure 9), I shift the focus from the image to the gaps. Finished with a matte black paint that absorbs 96% of visible light, they look like they exist somewhere at the fringes of our reality—at once real and not real, present and absent—and hint at the expansive portions of the Arctic that we are currently unable to see.

## Outnumbered by Instruments

As it turns out, despite intricate networks of sensors transmitting floods of information to research institutes across the globe, the Arctic Ocean remains—to this day—one of the least understood regions in the world (Harris 2005). It is brimming with mysterious sea creatures, unpredictable

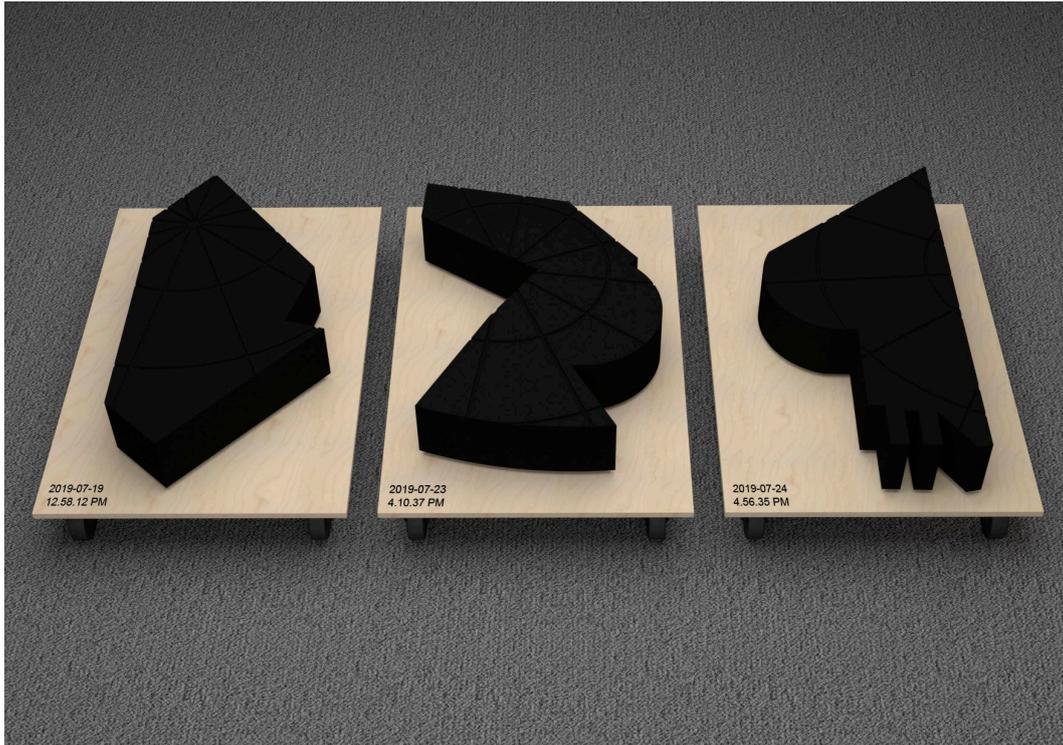


FIGURE 9. Carolyn Kirschner, *Satellite Gaps as Scientific Specimen*. Digital render, 2020.

weather patterns and ocean currents, shifting sediments, and erratic geomagnetic forces. As historian Richard White observes (1992), there is a tangible physical world out there that sometimes affirms but often mocks the representations and computational models we design to constrain it.

Scientific and cartographic processes of course offer valuable modes of study. But they paint a strikingly incomplete portrait of the Arctic and only offer partial glimpses of the rich realities forged by remote sensors. Multiple *alternative* conceptions of the polar north exist in the peripheral, defunct, or censored fringes of scientific models. Here, in the algorithmic wilderness, ecologies multiply and expand. Borders become fluid, the invisible becomes tangible, alternative models of reality appear, contradictory versions exist all at once, and sidelined fringes become the centerpiece. These alternative perspectives offered by technologies, however, are currently largely unaccounted for in ecological thinking. A whole realm of nonhuman consciousness is disregarded.

Meanwhile, remote sensors are tasked with making critical decisions that radically reconfigure the planet for humans and nonhumans alike; suggesting wildlife conservation strategies (Tibbetts 2017), plotting shipping routes (Bychkova and Smirnov 2018), selecting key sites for resource extraction (University of Bergen 2020), and mediating territorial disputes.

Their depictions of landscapes—although abstract and intangible—guide social, political, economic, and ecological activity. With that, they have a huge degree of agency, especially in regions such as the Arctic Ocean, where almost our entire understanding of the area is filtered through the eyes of machines.

But of course, neither official representations nor sidelined versions in the algorithmic wilderness are accurate representations of distant ecologies. It is impossible to digitally capture intricate earth systems and complex species in their entirety. No amount of data will offer the “truth” on the mysteries the Arctic Ocean conceals. Rather, the digital abstractions remote sensors offer are a lens through which to (re)calibrate our relationship to the natural world.

In an area ravaged by the effects of global warming, the streamlined imagery generated in the past and over the course of the ongoing territorial dispute has not succeeded in communicating the urgency of the environmental crisis. Rather, the region remains abstract and removed, too far away for human populations to feel the immediate effects of or to really understand their significance. So what lies beyond the confines of Western models and human senses? As climate change is physically shrinking the Arctic, could we find expanded ways of thinking about it?

Really seeing the world through the eyes of remote sensors is a chance for more visceral connections with distant ecologies: blurrier and messier than familiar imagery, and entangling us with bits, bytes, territories, species, and atmospheres. These otherworldly alter egos of the planet are a chance to develop new visual languages and expand representational paradigms in design and environmentalism. As remote sensors outnumber humans in the world’s most inaccessible regions, the stretchy machine realities forming in their wake reveal alternative conceptions of ecologies, of technologies, and of us.

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# COLLISION. New Media, Old Theory, and Critical Self-Encounter on the Internet

Summer Renault-Steele<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Frankfurt School thinkers were among the first to reflect upon mass culture under capitalism as an aesthetic–political force, proposing that mass cultural forms may either iterate or subvert the normative perspective of an audience. In our present attempts to grasp the aesthetic–political consequences of contemporary mass culture, it seems wise not only to retrace the history of this inquiry, but also to mine it. Drawing upon Siegfried Kracauer’s 1925 essay “The Mass Ornament,” I consider the aesthetic–political force of digital graphics interchange formatting, or the GIF. I suggest GIFs are a hyperbolic expression of the phenomenon Kracauer diagnosed as the “mass ornament”: an aesthetic that both informed and exposed the connection between material reality and a way of seeing. On Kracauer’s account, the mass ornament was iterative of a normative perspective, but it also invited the possibility of critical self-encounter among its audience. Retracing his diagnosis of the mass ornament, I submit Kracauer offered a heuristic that is illuminating for us today as we theorize the aesthetic–political impact of the GIF.

## Keywords

Frankfurt School, Mass Ornament, Graphics Interchange Format, Digital Culture, Capitalism

Concern about the consolidation of perspective in mass culture under capitalism is as old as analogue. In articles such as Siegfried Kracauer’s 1925 “The Mass Ornament,” Walter Benjamin’s 1935 “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” and in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s 1944 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frankfurt School critical theorists reflected upon mass culture as an aesthetic–political force. This force is the power of film, photography, newspaper, and radio to

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extinguish or introduce subversive perspective through collective reception. In present attempts to grasp the aesthetic–political consequences of contemporary mass culture, and in particular, the ways of seeing that digital media cultivate or discourage, it seems wise not only to retrace the history of this inquiry, but also to mine it. Film and media scholar Heidi Schlüpmann argues that strategies of thought bequeathed to us from early critical theory “regain their actuality in the encounter with digital technology,” which in turn can forge a path for aesthetic–political reflection on digital culture (2014, 4). In what follows, I explore one such path.

Drawing upon Kracauer’s critique of early-twentieth-century mass culture, I consider the kind of perspective encouraged by digital graphics interchange formatting (GIF). GIFs are standard image formats, first developed for the internet and now regularly used in communications across digital media. GIFs consist of blocks of pixels that alternate repeatedly, and the resulting appearance is like a truncated film clip infinitely reiterated. I draw a parallel between the GIF and an early feature of twentieth-century mass culture Kracauer diagnosed as the “mass ornament”: an aesthetic form that both informed, and exposed, the connection between the Weimar Republic’s material reality and a way of seeing. On Kracauer’s account, the mass ornament was iterative of a normative perspective, but it also invited the possibility of reflexive reckoning among its audience. I draw upon Kracauer’s study of the mass ornament as a heuristic for theorizing the aesthetic–political impact of the GIF.

Section One of this Collision examines Kracauer’s “The Mass Ornament” (*Das Ornament der Masse*) which originally served as a review of the Tiller Girls for the daily newspaper the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The Tiller Girls were a famous precision dance company that performed all over the Western world, appearing in films such as *Half Shot at Sunrise* (1930); they also inspired derivative dance troupes such as the Alfred Jackson Girls and the Hoffman Girls, and later, the iconic choreography of Hollywood director Busby Berkeley.<sup>2</sup> Kracauer links precision dance to the workplace, suggesting the former mirrors the Taylorist principles that dominated Germany’s labor force during the Weimar Republic. Taylorism (often referred to as Fordism in the US context) is a formula for a production process intended to increase efficiency, and is characterized by fracturing work into nu-

2 For more on the legacy of the Tiller Girls, see Donald (2007) and Vernon (1988). For a visual sample of the Tiller Girls’ performance, see their appearance in the 1930 film *Half Shot at Sunrise*.

merous simple tasks to be completed in rapid succession.<sup>3</sup> On Kracauer’s account, the mass ornament is the aesthetic singularity that surfaces in the analogy between the Tiller Girls’ choreography on one hand, and the Taylorist workplace on the other. Section Two develops Kracauer’s account of the mass ornament as a double-edged, political–aesthetic force. He imagined the mass ornament could performatively inform and normalize the ubiquity of Taylorist principles in the Weimar Republic. But, paradoxically, every performance also offered viewers an opportunity for critical self-encounter: an opportunity to unmask and identify that ubiquity. In light of this, Section Three advances an application of Kracauer’s theorization of the mass ornament to the GIF. Drawing a parallel between the aesthetic of the GIF and the principles of digital Taylorism, I suggest the former may be interpreted as a hyperbolic expression of Kracauer’s mass ornament.

I.

Upon viewing the Tiller Girls’ performance, Kracauer describes the dancers as “no longer individual,” but instead, crowded assemblages of former women ([1925] 1995, 75–76). As the dancers condense into geometric figures, their movements become nothing more than the “plastic expression of erotic life” (76). Kracauer bypasses any comparative terms that might allow the Tiller Girls to maintain their integrity as subjects, choosing instead language that emphasizes the transformative power of the choreography to denature its performers. An examination of the original German text can help illustrate this point: the Tiller Girls are not like indissoluble girl clusters, they “are ... indissoluble girl clusters [*unauflöbliche Mädchenkomplexe*]” ([1925] 1963, 50; my translation). Their choreography is not analogous to mathematics in its exactitude; rather, their movements “are demonstrations of mathematics [*deren Bewegungen mathematische Demonstrationen sind*]” ([1925] 1963, 50; my translation). The Tiller Girls do not resemble “sexless bodies in bathing suits”; rather, Kracauer writes, they “are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits” ([1925] 1995, 76). And when they dance, the Tiller Girls “are mere

3 Taylorism was implemented heavily in Germany in conjunction with the Dawes Plan after the Treaty of Versailles and came to dominate the Weimar Republic’s economic operation in the postwar period. For more on Taylorism, see Nelson (1980). For more on the Dawes Plan, see Young (2008).

building blocks [*Elementen zusammengestellt*],” component parts “and nothing besides [*nichts außerdem*]” ([1925] 1963, 51; my translation). With this phrasing, Kracauer signals the Tiller Girls perform an ontological shift upon dancing. They were recognizable as human beings, now they are something different:

The Tiller Girls can no longer be reassembled into human beings after the fact. Their mass gymnastics are never performed by the fully preserved bodies, whose contortions defy rational understanding. Arms, thighs, and other segments are the smallest component parts of the composition. (Kracauer [1925] 1995, 78)

Kracauer’s description slices the dancers into stray limbs and reorganizes them in the mind’s eye as if in a kaleidoscope. His macabre assertion that this dance can, “never be performed by fully preserved bodies,” suggests the Tiller Girls are, paradoxically, constitutively dismembered. This choreography demands a mobilization of the dancers’ bodies that achieves the overall effect of an inhuman representation: they are assembled to appear disassembled.

Kracauer conjures the image of the audience who, upon watching the Tiller Girls, delight in and mirror the pattern before them:

The regularity of their [the Tiller Girls’] patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged in the stands in tier upon ordered tier . . . The bearer of the ornaments is the mass and not the people . . . Only as parts of a mass, not as individuals who believe themselves to be formed from within, do people become fractions of a figure. (76)

There is a comparison between the Tiller Girls’ choreography, which reduces women to a series of generic, interchangeable body parts, and the architecture of a stadium built to funnel and corral anonymous crowds. Both dancers and audience thus share a kind of embodied reality in the moment of performance, for both enter the “mass” only as “fractions of a figure” rather than “people.” Yet, Kracauer also signals there is a more comprehensive recognition that occurs between the Tiller Girls and their audience; a deep identification that is, strangely, pleasurable. He writes, “the *aesthetic* pleasure gained from the ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*” (79, emphasis in original). For Kracauer, the audience has a positive response to the Tiller Girls precisely because the dance resonates with their own reality beyond the stadium. Kracauer outlines this resonance explicitly, declaring the Tiller Girls’ choreography is “conceived according to rational principles which the Taylor system merely pushes to their ultimate conclusion” (79). Finding Taylorist sensibility in the

Tiller Girls' dance is not a coincidence, he asserts, for the kickline is the "aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (79). Just as the Girls' dancing limbs strike a series of poses with well-coordinated precision, laboring hands at the conveyor belt repeat simple tasks in rapid succession: "The legs of the Tiller Girls answer [*entsprechen*] hands in the factory" ([1925] 1963, 54; my translation). Here, one "answers" the other, in the sense of fulfilling or solving; dance completes labor, labor completes the dance. Between the Tiller Girls and the production line then, time, space, and bodies are distributed with a correspondence that signals one ultimate aesthetic singularity. Kracauer writes, "the structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the entire contemporary situation . . . Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself" ([1925] 1995, 78). Which is to say, the choreography of the mass ornament cyclically iterates and informs a fundamental aesthetic organization, "a monstrous figure," shared between entertainment and work in the Weimar Republic.

## II.

In her study of Kracauer's piece, film and media scholar Miriam Bratu Hansen notes the essay has been criticized for its reductionist analogy between precision dance and the factory. Such criticism, however, fails to acknowledge that the relationship Kracauer delineates is neither literal nor obvious, but rather heuristic and symptomatic (Hansen 2012, 50). When Kracauer reviewed the Tiller Girls in 1925, the connection between the kickline and the assembly line had more or less already become a conventional motif in German culture, notably with Fritz Giese's illustrated ode to *Girllkulture*, or "Girl Culture,"<sup>4</sup> published the same year. This motif, however, remained stuck in the binary discourse of *Amerikanismus*, which either welcomed precision dance as a new "culture of training" or decried it as a manifestation of standardization and loss of individuality (Hansen 2012, 51). In contrast to either enthusiastic or pessimistic accounts, Hansen suggests Kracauer assumed a "dialectical stance toward the phenomenon, reading it as an index of an ambivalent historical development . . . from within a Marxist critique of capitalism" (51). Which is to say, Kracauer's critique of the Tiller Girls and the mass ornament is not evaluative. Rather,

4 My translation.

he reads mass cultural products as indexical, that is, as signs pointing to a larger material context.

In addition to reading mass culture from within a Marxist critique of capitalism, Kracauer's position is also developed from within a feminist critique of patriarchal gender norms under *Girllkulture*. For on Kracauer's account, representations of women's bodies as "Tiller Girls" specifically, was also symptomatic of capitalist development and the Republic's place in history. In other words, the increasing movement of women post World War One into white collar workplaces dominated by Taylorist management principles, and the cultural re-rendering of women's bodies into disassembled "girls" under *Girllkulture*, is not a coincidence for Kracauer. The Tiller Girls are not randomly chosen, empty signifiers in his essay, a point that is made more salient upon further investigation of Kracauer's oeuvre.<sup>5</sup> Rather, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> Kracauer's critical meditation on *Girllkulture* and its association with feminized, white collar labor is part and parcel of his anti-capitalist critique.

But even if Kracauer's work rests on a proto-Marxist-feminist assumption about the totality of patriarchal capitalism, his essay does not echo the model of base and superstructure. Rather, as Hansen notes, Kracauer borrows from the language of psychoanalysis, using it loosely to theorize about ideology as the aesthetic sensibility of a public unconscious. For, like a curious dream, the simultaneous omnipresence and occlusion of both capitalism and patriarchy in "the mass ornament" takes the form of a paradox to be deciphered (Hansen 2012, 51). Kracauer writes: "The production process runs its secret course in public," meaning it is both present, and completely unnoticed ([1925] 1995, 78). Indeed, Kracauer famously opens "The Mass Ornament" by claiming that "the inconspicuous surface-level expressions" of an epoch yield more substantial insights about "the position that epoch occupies in the historical process" than the "epoch's judgements about itself" (75). In other words, superficial mass culture is valuable precisely because of its thoughtless nature, which is to say it is an uninhibited expression of the material tendencies of the moment: it is the perfect mirror.

Hence, despite criticism of the mass ornament from both Marxist and feminist perspectives, Kracauer is reluctant to simply condemn it. Hansen argues that Kracauer "leaves the space of the author and ideal beholder

5 See for example, "The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies" ([1927] 1995); *The Salaried Masses* ([1930] 1998); "Working Women" ([1932] 1994); and "Girls and Crisis" ([1931] 1994).

6 See Renault-Steele (2016) and Renault-Steele (2017).

open for the empirical subjects who are present at these displays and to whom they are addressed” (Hansen 2012, 53). In other words, for Kracauer, collective reception of the mass ornament could go either way: it could simply iterate the audience’s reality, or it could trigger a re-examination of that reality in a moment of critical self-encounter. The latter may occur because mass culture (as opposed to a kind of cultural product created through the pure introspection of the artist) uniquely surfaces unexamined collective tendencies and places them right before us, creating a ripe opportunity for candid reckoning: “No matter how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament,” Kracauer writes, “its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms” ([1925] 1995, 79). Mass culture is “low brow,” but on Kracauer’s account, its capacity to speak to the larger material situation from which it emerges makes attending to it extremely important. Mass culture alone has the capacity to provoke the kind of reflection that is a precondition for making collective change in the first place. In this way, popular culture in fact bears the responsibility of all art: “When significant components of reality become invisible in our world, art must make do with what is left, for an aesthetic presentation is all the more the less it dispenses with the reality outside the aesthetic sphere” (79). In other words, art must draw upon a reality outside of itself in order to render visible, and submit to re-examination, the perspective that naturalizes that reality.

### III.

Kracauer’s early work is rooted in the culture of Weimar-era Germany, which means it is also necessarily about analogue cultural forms. Nevertheless, elements of his work are still useful for contemporary scholarship on digital culture. In his 2012 essay “In Kracauer’s Shadow: Physical Reality and the Digital Afterlife of the Photographic Image,” Lutz Koepnick argues for the underappreciated material continuity between analogue and digital photography. In light of this continuity, he argues Kracauer’s analysis of the former ought to be extended to the latter. Apart from the technical details of the comparison between analogue and digital photography—which Koepnick does demonstrate in full—he emphasizes that the importance of his comparison lies with a slightly different series of questions about the nature of digital materiality and its implications. This approach is inspired by Kracauer’s own studies:

The decisive question instead is how the digital in photography causes us to readdress the very notion of medium specificity, and how we should think about the relation between the . . . material makeup of a medium and its representational registers, its vernacular uses, and its artistic possibilities . . . Kracauer's work offers critical answers to these questions: answers that not only complicate our notion of a medium's materiality but also help realize critical continuities between analogue and digital forms of photographic practice. (Koepnick 2012, 114–16)

Koepnick argues that studying Kracauer's approach to the analogue photograph enables one to ask complex questions about the materiality of digital photography in the first place. This in turn, allows for the possibility of an illuminating comparison between the two allegedly distinct forms.

Ostensibly, Koepnick's insight about Kracauer's work applies when considering other forms of digital culture as well, including the GIF. Yet, there is still more about Kracauer's unique brand of materialism that makes his work of specific use here. This is what Hansen calls Kracauer's "*modernist materialism*," an influence she attributes to Marxian theory but also Jewish Gnosticism (Hansen 2012, 36–45; emphasis in original). For Hansen, Kracauer's modernist materialism is evident in three distinct yet related motifs in his writing, the first of which—his focus on the quotidian as a site of cultural critique—is most relevant here. Kracauer's penchant for the commonplace, the "detritus of history," she writes,

led Benjamin to characterize him as a (Baudelairean) chiffonnier, a "rag-picker." But he could have just as well have compared him to contemporary artists who deliberately chose ordinary, worthless, or devalued materials for their collages (such as Hannah Höch, Marianne Brandt, or Kurt Schwitters) or to the Dadaists readymades and the happenings that polemically exposed the contradictions of aesthetic hierarchies of value. (43)

Kracauer's modernist materialism is thus characterized by attention to superficial mass cultural products and a rejection of bourgeois, idealist cultural forms. Indeed, Kracauer introduces the Tiller Girls as products of American "distraction factories" ([1925] 1995, 75), which Hansen notes is a pejorative term in the "dictionary of the educated bourgeoisie" (2012, 44). The Tiller Girls represented glitzy, tawdry entertainment for the growing white-collar class, which meant they were an ideal subject for Kracauer's critique. This ethos makes Kracauer a natural ally in the attempt to understand digital materiality in the case of the GIF.

For instance, there are at present 35,200,000 results on Google for GIFs of the 1990s British pop group Spice Girls.<sup>7</sup> A number of top GIFs are cut from the 1996 music video of their hit song “Wannabe.” In one of these GIFs, the five singers stand together on a staircase, bouncing their right legs, hands on hips, nodding in unison. In another, all five point at the camera and swish their hips, first to the left, then the to the right. In yet another, the singers kick their right feet, stomping the ground all at once while each throws her hands down by her side. Immediately striking is the similarity between the choreography of the Tiller Girls described by Kracauer in “The Mass Ornament,” and the abrupt cycle that constitutes the GIF. Recall that the Tiller Girls’ choreography elaborated upon the form of the kickline, using tightly coordinated, repeated movements among individuals to render large group configurations. Kracauer described the dancers as no longer individuals, but instead as “crowded assemblages of former women.” He slices them into stray limbs, refers to them as “plastic,” and sees a mathematical precision behind their dance. Similarly, these GIFs have an inhuman, mechanical quality. The robotic aesthetic may indeed have been a quality of the original choreography for “Wannabe,” but regardless, the appearance is amplified by the rapidly alternating pixels characteristic of the GIF itself. The singers’ gestures appear accelerated, producing a rhythm that—because it is digital—exceeds the aesthetic of the Tiller Girls’ kick line with hyperbolic speed and precision.

Is it thus plausible that the GIF is an accelerated expression of the Taylorist aesthetic Kracauer saw at work so clearly in the Tiller Girls’ performance? This would imply the digital technology with which the GIF is created allows for an even more perfect expression of the Taylorist aesthetic than the one Kracauer saw accomplished through choreography. However, the claim that the tempo of a GIF replicates and even exacerbates the Taylorist aesthetic appears at first glance to be amiss, inasmuch as Taylorism is a principle of scientific management developed for the age of industrial mass production, not digital mass production. That is, Taylorism was originally developed for a kind of labor shared between industrial machinery and humans working together in factories, not computers and humans working in offices. Nevertheless, Kracauer was well aware that scientific management was used as a tool for organizing multiple kinds of workplaces and labor forces, observing its implementation in

7 123,056 of these particular GIFs can be found on the website *Giphy*. Accessed November 1, 2020 (<https://giphy.com/explore/spice-girls>).

both factories as well as office spaces.<sup>8</sup> I contend that Kracauer’s recognition of the portability of Taylorism allows us to extend his hermeneutic to the kind of labor associated at present with digital production.

Contemporary labor theorists have coined the term “digital Taylorism” to account for the application of scientific management principles to digital mass production shared between computers and humans.<sup>9</sup> *The Economist*, for instance, offers numerous examples of digital Taylorism in its 2015 Schumpeter column, including the common practice of slicing clerical work into minute tasks in order to outsource them to freelancers across the globe. The article also observes that digital technology allows for the enhanced micromonitoring of employees’ movement and efficiency. For example, firms now make use of peer-review software that turns performance assessments from an annual ritual into a perpetual trial. Researchers at MIT, the article goes on to note, have invented a “sociometric” badge, worn around the neck, “that measures such things as [one’s] tone of voice, gestures and propensity to talk or listen”; and construction companies use drones to monitor progress remotely on their sites, and if drones are not possible, Motorola makes terminals that strap to workers’ arms to monitor progress. Hence, it appears that digital production in fact allows for an even more intensified implementation of the principles of scientific management than mechanical production did. With digital technology, tasks can be subdivided into even smaller portions and outsourced across an even larger army of employees who are the most tightly regulated workforce in history. One of the most disturbing examples of this was exposed in Scott Simon and Emma Bowman’s 2019 article for *The Verge* (subsequently reported on by National Public Radio) on Facebook’s content moderators. Facebook contracts 15,000 moderators from around the world to manage flagged content on the platform. Despite the tremendously disturbing nature of the content, moderators are offered paltry time to process or heal. In fact, moderators’ time is managed down to the second, they must click a browser extension every time they leave their desk. In addition to two fifteen-minute breaks to use the bathroom and a thirty-minute break for lunch, moderators are given nine minutes of “wellness time” per day, reserved for when they encounter particularly traumatizing content. *Nine minutes* to recover from witnessing the most violent content, and then, moderators must return to their desks to re-

8 Kracauer performs a lengthy study of this in his monograph *The Salaried Masses* ([1930] 1998).

9 For more on this, see Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2010).

view yet more flagged content, or risk termination. Unsurprisingly, some moderators develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hence, it is not implausible that digital technology allows for an accelerated expression of twentieth-century scientific management principles in the workplace. We are living in a time when digital technology means that the possibilities for outsourcing labor are unprecedented, contributing, for many, to a permanent precarity in the workplace. Moreover, because of digital technology we are more tightly surveilled than ever before, and therefore, we are even more tightly regulated than laborers were in post-World War I factories or offices. Given this, if we are to read the GIF now in the way Kracauer read the dance of the Tiller Girls in 1925, we may begin to understand the political-aesthetic force of the GIF. The GIF iterates a perspective that is fractured and fitful, a way of seeing only made possible through digital means. The GIF is also symptomatic of the often frenetic, harmful, and dehumanizing way digital technology can shape working life. Viewing the GIF through the prism of Kracauer's mass ornament, we may either naturalize and iterate its aesthetic and the material reality it represents, or we may use it as an opportunity for critical self-encounter. As Hansen notes, whether or not this happens is part of the "undetermined game of history" (2012, 53), wherein the mass ornament may either iterate, or subvert, the normative perspective of the audience.

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# The Grip of Fear

## Art Horror's Challenge to Distance Embrace Theory

Marius A. Pascale<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The continued growth of the genre of art horror demonstrates an appetite for works that arouse pleasurable fear. 'Distance theory' posits that such responses are possible due to the space between audience and work, motivated by the audience's awareness of the work's fictional nature. While distance theory is viable, even its comprehensive contemporary formulation faces dilemmas. This paper will provide an overview of distance theory emphasizing the 'Distancing Embracing Model' (DEM) articulated by Winfried Menninghaus and others. Despite its advantages, DEM fails to acknowledge or explain two prevalent art horror engagement acts. These are (1) distance reduction and (2) distance suppression, complex phenomena wherein audiences strive to minimize or otherwise ignore their awareness of the distance between them and the work. Although these acts challenge the model, they need not invalidate it. Synthesizing DEM with a metatheoretical account incorporating multiple-order evaluations adjusts the original model, dissolving the dilemma while strengthening its explanatory capacity. The article will outline the DEM, the relation and complications of reduction and suppression phenomena, and propose a modified model. The conclusion will respond to objections and briefly illustrate potential contributions of adopting the proposed modifications.

### Keywords

Pleasurable Fear, Distance, Aesthetics, Philosophical Psychology

### 1. Introduction

The horror genre continues expanding across aesthetic media. While there are many explanations for the ever-increasing desire for horror, the

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trend illustrates prevalent appetites for works that successfully arouse fear (Bantinaki 2012, 383–84). How can such an ordinarily undesirable emotion attain pleasurable valence in the context of aesthetic engagement (Neil 1992, 54)?<sup>2</sup> “Distance theory” posits that pleasurable discomfort is possible due to the presence of a “space” between audience and work, resulting from awareness of the experience as aesthetic. While distance theory is inventive and viable, even its contemporary formulations encounter dilemmas in the face of two techniques prevalent in art horror engagement.

This paper will briefly outline and analyze distance theory, emphasizing Menninghaus et al. (2017)’s Distancing Embracing Model (DEM), which integrates current empirical findings to produce an updated, detailed explanatory schema of how distance facilitates pleasurable discomfort phenomena (Menninghaus et al. 2017). Despite its advantages, DEM cannot comprehensively explain pleasurable fear qua art horror. This stems partly from its failure to acknowledge prevalent mechanisms occurrent during horror engagement. These include distance reduction, wherein audience behavior incorporates efforts to minimize distance awareness, and distance suppression, a complex phenomenon in which participants strive to repress distance awareness. Subsequent sections analyze each technique and consider their implications for DEM.

Interestingly, DEM’s application to art horror receives little focus despite distance remaining a common explanation of pleasurable fear.<sup>3</sup> Distance manipulation weakens the explanatory power of DEM, but introducing minor modifications accomplished via synthesizing manipulation into the existing DEM framework, alongside inclusion of multiple-order evaluations, fortifies DEM’s explanatory capacity. Having thus established peculiarities of horror and the potential means by which to modify and defend DEM, I respond to potential objections in §7. This section will re-

- 2 Neill’s summation is of the “paradox of horror” (alternately known as the horror paradox). This paper will discuss the appeal of horror and pleasurable fear within the context of the broader paradox of pleasurable discomfort, as that is how it is analyzed within the DEM.
- 3 Outside of a brief application to the emotion (discussed in the article), neither the DEM’s authors nor invited contributors dedicate extended analysis to the relation between the model and pleasurable fear in art horror. For Menninghaus et al.’s proposal of DEM, as well as some responses, see Davies et al., eds. (2017).

spond to objections directed towards the proposed modification of DEM, not critiques of distance theory in its entirety.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Distance Theory

Proponents of distance theory use the concept of *pleasurable discomfort* to explain why emotional states that typically produce unease or distress (e.g., fear, disgust, sadness) can simultaneously be enjoyable during aesthetic engagement. Because of their representational nature, aesthetic objects remain distinct from reality. The audience's awareness of this produces "interspace" between audience and work (or "token") that is not only physical or ontological, but also allows a degree of affective, emotional distance.<sup>5</sup> Cognizance affords audiences a measure of detachment (Di Muzio 2006, 280). Base distance theory presents an intriguing albeit vague explanation. By what mechanisms does pleasure become possible? What vectors are required? Winfried Menninghaus et al.'s DEM purports to address such concerns by providing a model formally detailing the procedural processes through which negative affect contributes to an overall positive aesthetic evaluation and experienced pleasurable discomfort (Menninghaus et al. 2017). Doing so necessitates segmenting the event into two mechanisms, "distancing" and "embracing." These function in an ordered process that, when successful, allows for pleasurable discomfort in art reception. The authors go so far as to provide a diagrammatic outline of the process. On engaging with a work, the audience imports prior explicit cognizance of distance factors that, if successful, "keep negative emotions at some psychological distance, thereby safeguarding hedonic expectations of art reception against being inevitably compromised by the experience of negative emotions" (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 3). These factors *reframe* negative feelings that occur during aesthetic engagement. Thus, distance awareness prior to felt negative emotions allows audiences to not have the fears and worries they would have if what was depicted in the work was real, thereby allowing positive embrace of the emotions.

- 4 Debate over distance theory viability is an already well-trodden discussion which is outside the purview of this paper, which, again, is only to consider an *amendment* to DEM.
- 5 Ontological distance is taken to reference knowledge that the object of horror is not a genuine existing entity but a part of the story world domain of construct (actor, costume, computer generated image, etc.).

Should the process advance as outlined, the experience's product is pleasure and enjoyment.

As formulated, DEM makes at least two important contributions to the discourse on pleasurable discomfort. *First*, it details vectors that produce distance and embrace, thereby mitigating the accusation of vagueness levelled against earlier formulations.<sup>6</sup> Both vectors must be present, including, minimally, one distancing factor prior to evoking at least one means of embrace. Menninghaus et al. argue that findings in aesthetics and philosophical psychology demonstrate embracing factors such as mixed emotional interplays, artistic schema, importing meaning, and emotional regulation via genre recognition (Menninghaus et al. 2017). This enumeration is unlikely to be exhaustive (Strohl 2019, 7).

*Second*, DEM corrects prior accounts of distance as an inversion of negative emotional states (Strohl 2019, 7–8). Presence of pleasure does not merely swap negative emotions for enjoyment. Embrace requires ongoing negative affect in order to produce the overall aesthetic experience. For instance, art horror experiences that are without an element of discomforting fear are weak if not ineffectual. Distance embrace classifies pleasurable fear as a type of hedonic ambivalence, a complex state with necessary discomfort *and* enjoyment components (Strohl 2012, 206). Compositional interrelation between distance and embrace demands that both must be present and occur in a certain order. Distance is a precondition for embracing. Minimally, one “distance factor” must come first, or else the audience will be unable to adjust negative emotions, making it impossible to evoke embracing responses. Should the engagement allow both distance and embrace factors to activate, it becomes sufficient for the audience to experience pleasurable discomfort (Menninghaus et al. 2017).

Core tenets across distance theories, up to and including DEM, rely upon both the presence of, and the audience's desire for, distance. Audiences must acknowledge and accept depictions that are sufficiently removed from them. Should this ‘contract’ be broken, enjoyment approaches inversion into displeasure. You may enjoy the sadness evoked by a well

6 This paper will not provide exegesis of every individual factor proposed by Menninghaus et al. This would take us outside the present aim of emphasizing the relation between distance/embracing states as a whole to distance theory. The limit and nature of specific distance and embrace factors is currently undetermined. Critics, alongside Menninghaus et al., concede that the factors provided are not an exhaustive enumeration. For a list of those currently considered to comprise distance and embrace, see Menninghaus et al. (2017).

written tragedy, but you would obviously not enjoy the sadness were *you* to be struck by such a tragedy. Obversely, existence of distance alone is insufficient. Imagine an artist, X, who interrupts a show for their dedicated fans to announce that X has contracted a fatal illness. X presents a detailed, convincing account. Once attendees are sufficiently distraught, X reveals this was part of the show. Many audience members would doubtless respond to such deceit with displeasure. Importantly, their emotional state during the artist's "confession" and prior to the reveal would not be *pleasurable* sadness, but pure upset. Some might rationalize or reinterpret the experience, but only once the performative nature was clear. An analogous case may include the change from pure, unmitigated sadness or sympathy felt towards actors who have claimed to be the victim of disease or violence before revelations have prompted them to disclose it was faked. A further case within the horror community may include the dissatisfaction felt by some after learning that early "found footage" films (e.g., *The Blair Witch Project*) were staged.

### 3. Peculiarities of the Art Horror and Distance Relation

Distance theory requires that the audience maintain both the *existence* of distance between audience and work (through the work's being fictional), and their own *awareness* of that distance. Not all pleasurable discomfort functions according to this specific process. Pleasurable fear via aesthetic horror employs techniques that facilitate disrupting the relation between audience and distance. The first technique, *distance reduction*, occurs when the gap between audience and work is minimized. One common example is offering participants increased narrative agency by, for instance, giving them direct control over the decisions of a character in the work. This is most often seen in interactive narratives, such as survival horror games. The *Silent Hill* video game franchise include player control over the main characters, as well as branching paths that are opened and closed by the player's actions (Perron 2015, 98). Others involve enhanced sensory immersion, for example via augmented reality. Distance reduction encompasses a diverse range of methods, though, and exhaustively listing techniques is unnecessary.<sup>7</sup> All serve the aim of weakening aesthetic boundaries, thereby facilitating an audience's drawing closer to a work.

7 I will not provide an exhaustive list of all possible reduction techniques and innovations. Categorizing distance manipulation methodology is better served for projects in adjacent disciplines such as narratology, film studies,

While not a new phenomenon, distance reduction has become more prevalent in recent years. The persistent use of distance reduction in crafting art horror illustrates its potency in producing pleasurable fear.

The second technique for disrupting the audience's sense of distance is distance *suppression*. Unlike distance reduction, distance suppression receives minimal formal attention in aesthetic discourse.<sup>8</sup> Yet the phenomenon is intriguing and equally commonplace. Distance suppression occurs when the audience strives to facilitate pleasurable fear by *actively ignoring* their awareness of the distance between them and the work. Such behavior supplants explicit, overbearing acknowledgment of safety to nurture increased terror. Audiences who act thusly seemingly do so because, if successful, the act enhances discomfort and its concomitant pleasure. Awareness of the aesthetic gap eliminates the intense terror that would potentially occur in nonaesthetic analogues. For instance, consider how different a normal response would be between watching a horror film that features a killer on one hand, and on the other, finding oneself targeted by a murderer (Strohl 2019, 7). Significant numbers of horror audiences appear resistant to explicit, continuous distance awareness. The muting effect that distance theorists praise, horror audiences find at least partially dissatisfying, as it blunts fear. Appetite for suppression is not confined to connoisseurs with intense macabre predilections. Too great a sense of distance renders any art horror unable to arouse enough disquieting terror, and so impotent. Increasing the intensity of the audience's discomfort, in this case fear, amplifies their experience in a manner that can increase accompanying pleasurable hedonic experience (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 12).

Distance reduction and distance suppression are performed by audiences, but horror works, as well as many other genre artifacts, enable and facilitate this distance manipulation. Given the diverse proliferation of techniques, sample cases best illustrate the process. One method involves "modal fear construal," where audiences perceive the work as depicting a world where narrative events are possible, if not probable. Modal fear construal manipulates the audience's worldview, attributing concrete status to narrative, which aids in suppressing knowledge of the work as fictional.<sup>9</sup> Audiences behave in a similar way in interactive aesthetic con-

and literary analysis. That compiling such a list would prove significant underscores the pervasive quality of distance awareness reduction.

8 Some briefly discuss historical considerations, but none delve into the phenomenon. See, for example, Beardsley (1982), 288, 291.

9 For detailed analysis of modal fear construal, see Pascale (2016).

texts. Consider, for example, friends who explore haunted houses, abandoned penitentiaries, farms, or asylums. Participants derive enjoyable fear from the heightened sense of realism and they deprioritize awareness or acknowledgement of the experience as simulated. Works often facilitate distance suppression behavior. Cinematic horror often heightens realism and makes use of real-world analogues. Actors in haunted houses, for instance, are instructed to appear menacing by applying detailed makeup while shocking the audience by jumping out of hiding places or even physically grabbing them. Many such works also utilize pre-existing buildings, from homes with histories of hauntings, to former asylums and prisons (see Stone 2006, 149). Interactive virtual reality narratives compound sensory immersion through superior graphical and auditory fidelity alongside tactile and olfactory simulators. Each innovation is designed to aid the audience in hampering their awareness of the experience as simulated. Nor is wanting to aid the audience in this respect recent. Recall the myriad campfire tales, which often begin by noting how the (fictional) murders that occur in the story transpired at this very location exactly one year ago. Doing so strips away significant distance and safety, increasing fearful dread and anticipation. Finally, classic cinematic horror also employs techniques designed to bring the work into closer confrontation with the audience,<sup>10</sup> for example by hiring actors in monster makeup to enter the theatre mid-screening or utilizing three-dimensional effects. Others have gone so far as to wire cinema seats to deliver small electric shocks, simulating a monster approaching from behind (Hutchings 2004, 80–81).

Although narrative and metanarrative attempts to draw audiences away from conscious aesthetic awareness in order to establish distance minimization and suppression are not new, recent narratological and technological advances produce more effective immersion with higher success thresholds. Scholars of cinema note that earlier, unsophisticated manipulations met with inconsistent success. Some attempts, such as the introduction of live actors and large rubber spiders into the theater, unintentionally hindered audiences' desire to forget distance and were instead perceived as humorous (Hutchings 2004, 81). Use of contemporary im-

10 In this instance, “confront” is meant to denote an ordinary language referent of presenting the horror object to the audience in a manner meant to induce fear. It is distinct from its usage in specific aesthetic contexts (e.g., Derek Matravers’s sense of artistic “confrontation” as specified in *Fiction and Narrative* (2014)).

mersion techniques, including real-world analogues, have proven more successful, increasing demand for use in art horror (Freeland 2003, 201).

#### 4. Art Horror Oddities and Current Distance Theory

If art horror employs distance manipulation, this prompts two questions. First, does distance manipulation relate to the arousal of pleasurable fear? If not, further inquiry proves unnecessary. However, a relationship is evident. Distance-manipulating techniques can cultivate intensified terror fostering pleasurable fear. Many horror audiences respond positively to such devices, particularly when a work proves conducive to reducing and/or suppressing the felt distance between the audience and the work. While diverse in many respects, art horror artifacts share the goal of generating pleasurable fear (Gaut 1993, 335). A subgenre, style, or approach which proves ineffectual in this regard will fall out of use.<sup>11</sup> If audience reception to distance reduction and/or suppression were received negatively, works that facilitate their use of such behaviors would find less success. But the consequent here is demonstrably false. Audiences often gauge the success of a horror work by how much terror it inspires. Some means of measuring fear can include how “real” it felt, and whether the fear remained after the work concluded—in brief, whether the work facilitated the audience’s capacity to feel as though the work was *more than* just a work. Distance manipulation has proven a persistent factor behind the notoriety, impact, and resultant success of horror works.

Having now answered the initial inquiry, it is possible to analyze what implications, if any, each phenomenon might have for distance theory, particularly DEM. While reduction and suppression behave distinctly, both suggest greater complexity behind the distance phenomena than DEM posits. This is particularly salient in relation to audience behavior and desire. Distance *reduction* is not incompatible with distance *awareness*. Some audience member X may want more narrative immersion, which requires diminished distance. However, X does not want the experience to override underlying recognition of the fictional status of what is represented in a work. Nevertheless, distance reduction demonstrates a largely unacknowledged complexity in distance theory’s claim. All formulations of distance theory treat as a foundational premise that audiences have an explicit need/desire for distance. Although this is broadly accurate, reduc-

11 For discussion of horror as reflecting cultural anxieties, see Freeland (2000). See also Asma (2014).

tion phenomena show the existence of distance simpliciter is insufficient. Minimally, horror audiences only desire distance in appropriate measure. Reduction often proves vital to producing requisite fear. A significant sense of distance renders a work ineffective at generating terror. Worse, it may provoke an opposing response of humor. While such “schlock” or “camp” works provide a form of entertainment, they will not satisfy those expressly interested in experiencing pleasurable art horror fear (Freeland 2000). Conversely, too *little* distance may lead audiences to disengage due to excess fear, thus impeding embrace.

Suppression behaviors further complicate the process. The DEM is, as stated above, a *model*, and it depicts the process as a strict, linear function. The model aims at “identifying processing components that are hypothetically relevant for the hedonic processing of negative emotions across the art domains” (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 4). However, DEM fails to account for the role of suppression in the process of generating pleasurable fear in art horror. The model conceives of the creation and maintenance of distance as straightforward. For the audience, situational activation of awareness of distance factors “precedes the online processing and is maintained throughout it” (3). Modeling the process exclusively in this way is too simple. Presence of distance alone is sometimes insufficient to generate the enjoyment required for overall pleasure. Pleasurable discomfort can require adjustment beyond simple continuous awareness and maintenance of distance.

The DEM considers simple continuous maintenance of distance awareness necessary and sufficient (Strohl 2019, 6, 8). Awareness satisfies the necessary precondition for progress towards enjoyment of what would otherwise be undesirable fear (contingent on fulfilling remaining aspects of the DEM process). The existence of distance suppression demonstrates that some audiences actively resist prioritizing acknowledgment of distance. Deriving a rewarding art horror response requires subverting space between depiction and viewer. Audiences may want to surmount recognition, which is seen as an obstacle to a rewarding engagement. As DEM describes, the audience recognizes one or more distancing factors alongside felt negative emotions. This, in turn, motivates the process towards allowing the audience to open themselves to the embrace factors. This simple transition is not always possible. An additional process must occur, during which the audience member needs to manipulate this distance awareness to spur stronger felt negative emotional intensity sufficient to eventually produce an output of pleasurable enjoyment. DEM portrays the process as analogous to a linear computational function. The simple inputs of distance and felt negative emotions allows progress to embrace factor(s),

producing a pleasure output. Extending the computational metaphor, some engagements require an additional subroutine, where distance is manipulated post-recognition.

Distance reduction and suppression, while distinct, both highlight an obstacle to DEM's explanation of pleasurable discomfort. Consistent acknowledgment of distance simpliciter is not always sufficient for one to progress towards embrace and eventual pleasure. Distance awareness must sometimes undergo additional alteration, or else the audience will fail to reach adequate levels of fear required to achieve the necessary threshold for eventual pleasure. However, these mechanics are not addressed by the DEM. The rationale behind their exclusion is unclear, given that distance manipulation is a common practice of horror audiences. Regardless, the consequence produces an incomplete model.

## 5. Addressing Complications

Introduction of distance reduction and suppression complicates DEM but does not necessarily render it useless. The authors identify DEM as an initial construct of an evolving model, which can benefit from further research to determine additional criteria and model components within the processing schema (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 15). Incorporating distance manipulation is not only possible, but further strengthens DEM's application and explanatory capacity regarding pleasurable art horror. This requires acknowledging the presence of manipulation alongside determining how it factors into a modified model. Contrary to what might seem to be the implications of this, pleasurable fear does require existence and awareness preconditions. The desire for distance suppression and reduction does not change these foundational concerns. Manipulation only concerns audiences adjusting their perception of distancing schema (art, spatiotemporal awareness, or fictional status). It does not *eliminate* awareness but rather assists in reducing overwhelming acknowledgment.

How can the presence and acknowledgement of distance be reconciled with seemingly competing reduction and suppression desires? Before progressing onto substantive proposals, it is beneficial to analyze the initial model's proposed application to pleasurable fear. Interestingly, Menninghaus et al. only offer a brief application to horror, asserting a need for future development. Increased negative affect produces increased enjoyment, as positive embrace is due in no small part to fearful feelings. The authors further claim, "roles of suspense and thrill seeking are widely acknowledged . . . suspense-driven arousal is an important factor in the

co-activation of positive and negative affect and that this factor may be instrumental in making fear/horror enjoyable” (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 16). Fear and horror generate sources of arousal, with suspense providing the added component necessary to generate mixed affective dread/anticipation that (assuming presence of distance) can prove pleasurable.

For the purposes of this paper, the dominant concern is DEM’s lack of inclusion of and (by extension) explanation for distance manipulation behaviors of reduction and suppression, which are distinct from its depiction of distance awareness as an immediate, simple, and prevalent occurrence. As a secondary concern, DEM proponents offer little explanation of suspenseful dread particulars. Although they classify this state as the pre-eminent mixed emotion/embrace factor, they provide no suggestions as to how one generates the state during horror engagement, nor why the intensity required differs between individuals. Remodeling DEM to incorporate distance manipulation can better explain each. Awareness simpliciter is conducive to neither fear nor suspense. By its nature, distance awareness is designed to push against and lessen an otherwise purely negative felt state. Achieving the requisite fear and dread requires a measure of persistent felt negativity. Since fearful dread is limited by scope and awareness of a work as fiction, intensity may need to be achieved indirectly, namely, by suppressing or reducing overt acknowledgment of distance. Effectively, this behavior is performed to foster sufficient horror and suspense to generate the integrally mixed emotion of fearful dread. Acting thusly demonstrably correlates to more intensity and greater potential enjoyment (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 16). The requisite level of intensity is variable across individuals. Some desire, if not require, more intensity than others do. Such individuals may utilize distance manipulation, and may pursue aesthetic horror experiences more conducive to such behaviors. This can explain differences in horror preferences as well as the seeming correlation between how intense an experience someone wants, on one hand, and how much they engage in distance manipulation behavior, on the other. Consider, for example, the horror aficionado immersing themselves in the horror community.<sup>12</sup>

How does one manipulate distance awareness to engage with a work as if the boundary between oneself and the work has collapsed, while simultaneously *retaining* awareness of distance? Is this not contradictory? No: such maintenance is achieved through the complex *meta*-response of

12 I will not discuss horror immersion and its extensive relation to DEM in the present paper, as it is an issue that requires significant detail that has yet to receive consideration. This is work I hope to do in the future.

art horror engagement. Initial usage of meta-response within art horror is commonly attributed to Susan Feagin's attempt to dissolve the paradox of horror (Solomon and Shaw 2003, 261). She considers art horror enjoyment as rooted in "meta-pleasures," second order feelings toward one's initial fear response (Feagin 1992, 83). If horror provokes fear, it means one can respond appropriately to the given stimulus (*ibid.*). This produces pleasurable self-satisfaction. Conversely, if someone considers taking pleasure in horror appropriate, they enjoy feeling thusly. The final potential response occurs when someone becomes "psychologically flexible" enough to enjoy horror they previously could not (*ibid.*, 83–84).

Feagin's proposed framework of "meta-response as conceptual architecture" is invaluable, as it accurately identifies horror engagement as multilayered: capable of comprising more than a singular evaluative and emotive state. Importantly, mental states can persist at a second order without requiring uninterrupted immediate awareness. Audience failure to manifest immediate awareness and constant, conscious maintenance of some emotional state does not render that state nonexistent. Such considerations are crucial to both a robust explanation of the experience of art horror and a reconciliation of DEM with distance suppression and reduction. Meta-theory explains simultaneous behaviors of distance cognizance while pursuing reduction and suppression for generating stronger felt negative emotions. Some find felt ambivalence desirable and evaluate it positively. However, there are typically limitations. Extreme or insufficient discomforting fear overwhelms ambivalence, resulting in displeasure. Conversely, insufficient fear will not produce pleasurable unease. Here, the *variable* nature of distance proves vital. A sense of distance can keep fear from overwhelming an audience preserving the internal environment necessary for the mixed-emotion state to flourish. Should one's experience intrude on their distance awareness threshold, it increases the likelihood of becoming too unpleasant. It ceases to be a complex concomitant state (e.g., ambivalence), transitioning to unambiguous terror. Levels of discomforting terror required for successful arousal of ambivalence are not identical. For some, this requires more intense levels of suspenseful fear, which may necessitate closer approximation to real horror. Closing this gap can prompt one to seek out and utilize either or both distance reduction and suppression.

Meta-responses explain how seemingly contradictory impulses between desire for distance and distance manipulation attain homeostasis. When individuals engage with horror, they have a persistent awareness of the work as separated by distance. For many, this is an explicit requirement. Were there no distance, the experience would be identical to gen-

uine horror. However, successful engagement does not, as DEM posits, require retention at the immediate level of first order (e.g., explicitly conscious) awareness (Strohl 2019, 8, 9). If one requires stronger discomfort in order to experience sufficient pleasure, an overbearing recognition of distance between work and audience would render the experience insufficiently enjoyable. In such cases, the awareness of distance must be relegated to a second-order position. A background recognition of aesthetic nature persists, but it is below conscious acknowledgment.

In such cases, one is engrossed at the first-order level with continuing through the experience of pleasurable fear. Since second-order awareness persists, the individual remains capable of proceeding into the embrace phase of the process. This accounts for a crucial aspect of engagement overlooked by DEM theorists. As I have shown, distance theorists inaccurately assume that awareness and distance maintenance retain prominence (or at any rate they fail to explicitly state otherwise) (Strohl 2019, 8, 9). Distance reduction and suppression behaviors do not entail the *elimination* of the audience's awareness of distance, only that some audiences cannot have it consistently foregrounded. Distance awareness may exist "out of focus," without thereby being erased altogether. Awareness persists at the second order, on standby, should the individual require reminding—as they might, for instance, if their terror reaches such intensity that it unbalances the desirable mixed emotion. One possible occurrence during horror experiences is the act of reminding oneself of the fictional nature and resulting distance. Hence, the repetition of phrases such as, "It is not real, it is only a (movie, book, etc.)." This mantra is uttered as a safety mechanism, and only when reassurance is necessary. It is not uttered by every individual throughout every horror engagement.

Awareness can exist as a simultaneous first-order state alongside pleasurable fright. Some audiences attain satisfactory fear by retaining a consistent immediate cognizance of the fictional status of the work to which they are attending. In such cases, the initial DEM accurately captures the experience. However, this is not always the case. Whether one finds constant maintenance desirable or instrumental to maintaining hedonic homeostasis required for pleasurable fear is contingent on individual factors. This also proves true when it comes to how little distance one may require. Situationism cannot be disregarded, as engagement preference is shaped by individual factors (see Doris 2002). In this regard, art horror is no different from other, distinct mixed states such as pleasurable sadness or pleasurable disgust. Aesthetic and nonaesthetic experiences offering scant to no distance attract significantly smaller willing audiences. Such experiences are not altogether nonexistent. For example, there are those

who seek out life-threatening extreme activities, or who derive pleasure from the reception of significant pain. Advocates for such avenues as a source of pleasure are comparably minimal, but they exist (see Klein 2014, 47). Their existence helps to demonstrate that pleasurable fear particulars are not homogenous across persons.

Fostering the state of art horror can involve multilayered cognitive processes. The ability to maintain background awareness of distance while simultaneously approximating a sense of close involvement can increase the discomfort crucial for end-state enjoyment (Prinz 2004, 135). Such processes are particularly noticeable during instances of heightened distance suppression. Inclusion of such processes and awareness of aesthetic distance allows the account to address prevalent desires for less awareness. Thus, the present proposal supplements the DEM.

How would this complex mechanism be integrated into Menninghaus et al.'s DEM? The initial model places distance awareness as the primary step in engagement. Felt distance accompanies felt negative emotions, allowing for embrace of the mixed emotional state of fearful dread/horror/suspense. Stronger emotional responses correlate with more potent enjoyment. For some, this greater intensity is desirable, and for some it is even necessary. Achieving these stronger responses requires stepping closer to fear, which is achieved via manipulating distance awareness. In terms of Menninghaus et al.'s model, this distance manipulation occurs after the initial interplay of distance and felt negative emotions. At this point, distance awareness undergoes manipulation, providing an opportunity for the audience to remove it from primacy while transforming it into a second-level meta-awareness. Doing so fosters an environment that is less obstructive to greater intensity of fear and resultant suspenseful dread. This process, which generates mixed emotions, occupies the first-order or priority state. The process retains the quasilinear behavior of the original DEM, albeit with the addition, sometimes, of a step where distance recognition undergoes adjustment prior to embrace. Revision and manipulation (including meta-response mechanisms) facilitates producing the mixed emotional state central to pleasurable horror. Despite its frequency and prevalence, distance manipulation is not always present. As shown, some individuals do not require adjustment, deriving sufficient fear and suspense from engaging while distance awareness maintains consistent and significant. Regardless, when manipulation is present, the model must be adjusted accordingly. The fact that distance manipulation is not ubiquitous does not provide sufficient grounds for discarding the present proposal. In its current state, DEM is persuasive but ultimately incomplete. The model merits further development to better account

for the complexity and nuance of pleasurable discomfort reactions in aesthetic engagement.

## 6. Illustrative Cases

Contrasting two cases demonstrates audience and procedural mechanics. Proponents of distance theory utilize the “actual killer” example. You can enjoy fear while watching a slasher film featuring a killer stalking and dispatching victims. Should you return home to meet an actual killer intent on murdering you, the fear you feel in response is less likely to incorporate pleasure. Advocates take this to support that pleasurable fear requires necessity and awareness of distance (Hills 2005, 4). This case does appear to demonstrate the veracity of their claim. If the “actual killer” were to reveal themselves as the viewer’s friend playing a prank, distance always existed, as the viewer was never going to be harmed by the “killer.” Homicide was never your friend’s intent. Regardless, it would not make the fear felt before the reveal enjoyable, as the “victim” was unaware that there was no danger. On a basic level, the case demonstrates necessary existence and acknowledgment of distance. However, it is an oversimplified illustration.

Compare a purely aesthetic experience incorporating full awareness of fiction. Specifically, the interactive horror narrative *Doki Doki Literature Club (DDLC)*. Widely known and positively received, *DDLC* casts the player as a member of an extracurricular poetry club. They attend meetings and gradually befriend other club members for an extended period. This all establishes the appearance of a high school drama narrative.<sup>13</sup> Soon, though, minor surreal occurrences begin happening. Characters behave erratically, exhibiting shifts in mannerism and poetry. And then, suddenly, one character, after presenting a disconcerting poem repeatedly imploring an unknown presence to “get out of my head,” commits suicide. From this point on, the game vacillates between ordinary club activities and sudden shifts in tone while the architecture appears to develop errors. Options within the menu start to disappear; camera angles shift; dialogue becomes replaced with illegible glitching or artifacting; and characters become distorted, becoming suddenly and briefly replaced with monstrous deformed creatures. Furthermore, aspects of the game from menu options to character dialogue begin referring, not to the protagonist whom the player is controlling, but to the actual player themselves.

13 Such narratives are typically classified under the “visual novel” subgenre.

Importantly, these “glitches” are neither programming nor computing errors, but intentional design choices made to appear as such. Direct references to the player are accomplished via scanning their online accounts or gamer profiles, thereby producing tailored references at preplanned points during the game’s narrative. The climax reveals that the poetry club president (who is a non-player character) has become self-aware and developed an obsessive fixation on the player (*not* their avatar). The suicides, glitches, and shifts stem from her corrupting the game to make the player choose them as their object of love. At this point, players must go into the game’s code and delete the character file of the villain to successfully reach the end. Failing to recognize this action and act accordingly results in a program lock, during which the player cannot exit the game.

Works such as *DDLC* manifest art horror distance reduction and suppression. The narrative initially provides prominent distance. The gradual intensification of distance reduction in the work causes a corresponding intensification of the player’s fear. The inclusion of tailored interactions and what seem to be programming errors strongly impede distance awareness. These inclusions help audiences effectively suppress their awareness of distance. For example, by slowly transitioning the player’s awareness that the horror object’s fixation is directed towards the player, *not* the player avatar. *DDLC* has become a noteworthy horror artifact, drawing attention in both gaming and horror communities, and even more broadly.<sup>14</sup>

Broad assertions of “real killer” cases retain persuasive components, insofar as the hypothetical examples demonstrate a distinction between actual horror and art horror. *DDLC*-type cases adhere to this as well. At no point does the game *actually* violate distance: all it does is create *illusions* of such a violation. Nor do most players believe themselves targeted by a malicious program, as the narrative is geared towards audiences with developed boundary awareness. A meta-awareness model explains subtle mechanisms at play, particularly their means of cultivating distance central to pleasurable fear. In *DDLC*-type cases, the player retains awareness of the work as sufficiently distanced. However, this remains beneath overt or explicit awareness, so as not to intrude on establishing fear necessary for pleasurable frightful dread. Distance reduction nurtures distance suppression, the two techniques working in tandem to deepen the experi-

14 I owe my awareness of *DDLC*’s presence in popular culture, as well the initial suggestion of its potential as an illustrative example, to Derek Matravers’s contributions in the Göttingen University Conference on the Role of Emotions in Aesthetic Psychology (2017).

ence and allowing for a more robust first-order felt negative emotion for those seeking more intensity. Audiences remain aware that they could always simply close the program. This knowledge does not need to be at the forefront of the audience's mind, though: rather, the awareness is revisited and adjusted after the felt negativity to maximize the sense of fear needed to produce a sufficiently potent contribution to achieve the mixed state. Prominent distance awareness would not allow enough fear to supply the vital component to fearful dread.

## 7. Objections and Responses

Having established the proposal, the paper will consider and counter three potential objections. It might be questioned whether distance reduction and suppression are distinct. And indeed, ascertaining strict boundaries between states is challenging. It does not follow, though, that they are identical. Distance reduction only requires that audiences take steps to deepen immersion, not that they desire to reject or ignore aesthetic awareness. The viewer may desire more realism to make a work sufficiently interesting. Insufficient realism (e.g., unconvincing effects or ineffectual cinematography) hinders immersion, and risks transforming a work of art horror into a parody. Distance suppression, by contrast, involves *active effort* to undermine awareness of a work's fictional status. While each exhibit distinct attributes, they do not have to remain separate nor mutually exclusive. *DDLC* exemplifies how the audience uses cooperation between suppression and reduction in order to facilitate pleasurable fear ambivalence. Audiences may employ distancing and suppressing behaviors in a single engagement. Distance reduction proves useful, if not necessary, to distance suppression. Conversely, reducing distance does not necessarily benefit from, nor must it explicitly rely upon, active distance suppression.

Separate concern may arise over the proposal's use of meta-responses, an aspect of Feagin's methodology that critics have argued contradicts her stance.<sup>15</sup> Feagin asserts her solution is integrationist in nature. That is, her solution explains pleasures of art horror as stemming from the capacity to enjoy fright (Feagin 1992, 77, 80). However, some meta-responses she provides do not depend on enjoying fear. Not only can some of her proposed positive second-order evaluations exist independently from such pleasure, but some *must* (Feagin 1992, 78). These meta-pleasures are

15 See, among others, Carroll (1992), Strohl (2012), and Pascale (2016, 2019).

contingent upon the audience *not* enjoying the fear they are experiencing. X believes responding to the work with fear and disgust is appropriate. Knowing that this is the intended reaction, X feels second-order pleasure towards his or her appropriate emotional composition. It is not the fear X enjoys, but their feeling towards the fear.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, another of her methods requires fully enjoying horror, which denies the presence and contribution of discomfort. Compared to other genres, “horror doesn’t like you. It does not care if it causes you to lose sleep. Horror doesn’t mind if it frightens you so much it makes you swear off something you love, like camping or swimming in the ocean” (Tallon 2010, 35). If one straightforwardly enjoys what one feels, one is not reacting appropriately. For the second-order response to exist necessitates finding the experience less than fully enjoyable. In instances of “psychological flexibility,” pleasurable response can only come from learning to look past distasteful fear. Were it the case that one found it entirely enjoyable or appropriate, no flexibility is involved (Carroll 1992, 87).

Feagin’s proposal is substitutive. It explains horror’s appeal via arguing circumstances of engagement reshapes the experience from one of terror to pleasure (Strohl 2019, 10). A positive second-order response to art horror fully transforms a discomforting experience into an enjoyable one. As Menninghaus et al. assert, responses to horror more accurately comprise a concomitant mixed state, neither fully pleasant nor unpleasant, but strongly ambivalent (Strohl 2019, 10). Will usage of meta-responses in the proposed amendment prove vulnerable to similar objections? While both build on a foundation of first- and second-order cognition, there are no further similarities. The DEM amendment does not necessitate a substitution framework, thus circumventing the maligned aspects of Feagin’s account. The amendment also does not discuss the specific valence of emotive states (Prinz 2004, 134–35). Rather, it uses meta-responses to explain the specific mechanism behind how audiences can simultaneously sustain the desire for and awareness of distance, on one hand, and the need for a state of minimized/suppressed immediate cognizance, on the other.

Lastly, pleasurable discomfort in art reception encompasses diverse states of pleasurable fear, sadness, cringe, and disgust. Such phenomena help explain the appeal of horror, as well as tragedies and those comedic subgenres that employ awkwardness and discomfort. Does horror alone employ distance manipulation? Furthermore, if other pleasurable discomfort artifacts utilize manipulation, will this alter the proposed modifica-

16 For an in-depth critique of Feagin’s meta-theory see (among others) Carroll (1992), and Pascale (2016).

tion? Art horror engagement displays ample, invited use of distance manipulation. In this regard, pleasurable fear during horror engagement is distinct from other sorts of pleasurable discomfort: how often do nonhorror genre tokens employ comparable efforts to eliminate distance-awareness barriers? Is there a plurality of virtual tragedy simulators where we choose whether to die before a partner does, weigh the decision to stop the treatment of a relative, or endure the slow decline of a fatal illness? Do audiences elect to go on “cringe tours” that force them to participate in intensely embarrassing situations? Cringe humor and/or disgust-related pleasurable discomfort remains primarily reliant upon actors and unsuspecting participants. Individuals may endure distressing or humiliating events to attain some ulterior motive or reward external to aesthetic enjoyment, such as financial compensation or public attention. The participants here are not the individuals who derive pleasurable discomfort. Experiential pleasurable cringe or disgust is rather had by those who engage with the depictions as spectators fully aware of the distance while vicariously enduring the ordeal.

Evidence suggests that use of distance manipulation may happen outside of horror. For example, first-person autobiographical narratives emphasizing a crushing loss may allow a reader to better approximate the feeling of living the tragedy.<sup>17</sup> Even if manipulation techniques are utilized beyond horror’s pleasurable fear arousal, their frequency, intensity, and presence are less frequent. Horror involves direct, persistent usage of distance awareness manipulation, making it a central feature of horror engagement.<sup>18</sup> Given the relative nascency of such analysis, it would not be surprising for future research to uncover alternative sources of pleasurable discomfort distance manipulation. Even if corroborations exist, they will not weaken the proposed modification. Indeed, to the contrary, this would establish distance suppression and reduction as more common than so far acknowledged. Horror would simply provide a *clear* case of manipulation, opening the door to further development and application. Demonstrating the presence of distance reduction and/or suppression in aesthetic engagements outside of pleasurable fear and horror would only serve to emphasize the importance of modifying DEM to account for the phenomena.

17 The author attributes this to an anonymous reviewer for *Evental Aesthetics*.

18 For a discussion of the formative, central components of genre, see Friend (2012).

## 8. Conclusion

Granting the proposal due consideration necessitates DEM be considered a viable explanation of pleasurable discomfort. The proposed modification is not designed to undermine DEM in such a way as to render it wholly invalid.<sup>19</sup> Nor should the proposal be viewed as championing an alternative method. Rather, the proposal is designed to draw attention to some underanalyzed considerations while providing further potential support. An exegesis of DEM uncovers a lack of consideration for certain aesthetic behaviors and trends. Interestingly, even this contemporary descriptive model, which endeavors to fully demystify the function of distance and its relation to audience pleasurable discomfort, fails to fully acknowledge the existence of distance suppression and reduction techniques. This oversight is concerning, especially as their use within horror has proven enduring. As such, it is incumbent upon DEM to sufficiently explain how it can incorporate an explanation for such behaviors.

Although significant, these lacunae do not invalidate DEM's explanatory power. DEM's infrastructure can and ought to be strengthened. As shown, integrating metatheory provides such an avenue. Inclusion of metaconsiderations dissolves the seeming paradox of distance manipulation. Furthermore, it not only aids in explaining how distance coexists with distance manipulation, but presents some consequences that may prove instrumentally beneficial. It affords distancing-embracing methodology a closer alignment with the mechanisms of mixed emotion generation, arguably an accurate conception of the pleasurable discomfort phenomenon, and the classification Menninghaus et al desire for their proposal (Strohl 2019, 10).

The modification also potentially further advances discourse in adjacent avenues of discourse. Consider, for instance, the discussion of horror art and morality. Tokens of art horror are no stranger to moral controversy. As a genre, horror often employs controversial subject matter. Thus, it is popularly a target of moral recrimination. Some critics of the genre contest that aesthetic distance serves to exacerbate the immoral influence of the genre. The fact that art horror allows individuals to view the monstrous, sadistic, and gruesome events from a distance, they charge, facilitates desensitization. Audiences come to regard the depictions as a source of entertainment, gradually degrading healthy reactive attitudes

19 Distance theory is not without its detractors. Such objections have been discussed at length elsewhere by, among others, Carroll (1996) and Di Muzio (2006).

towards analogous events in reality (Di Muzio 2006, 286). If one can suppress the awareness of distance into an upper level of recognition, it may affect the influence of art horror on audiences<sup>20</sup>—for example, by expediting the degree to which one may become desensitized. Presumably because of DEM’s relative nascency, any possible interrelation between the model and the moral status of engaging with art horror has been the recipient of little to no analysis. This goes *a fortiori* for DEM’s variations, including the one proposed in this paper. Nevertheless, the potential for intersection exemplifies one of many avenues of future discourse that may result from DEM, which itself provides a fruitful means of explaining pleasurable discomfort in aesthetic engagement.

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20 The author will not discuss this, as such a complex topic requires analyzing a separate set of factors. Its mention suggests potential future research.

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# A Conversation on Hagi Kenaan's *Photography and Its Shadow*

Hagi Kenaan and Assaf Evron

*In this wide ranging interview, Hagi Kenaan reflects on the potential of photography to intervene in times of crisis such as the current global pandemic. In his new book *Photography and Its Shadow*, Kenaan discusses the history of photography from an angle that has, quite literally, been overlooked. He points to the marked rupture in our relationship with the world that photography provoked and explains how this initial rupture is crucial for understanding our contemporary visuality. The disappearance of the shadow in photography, he argues, characterizes not only the history of philosophy itself but also indicates an irreversible change in our relationship to nature, to the real, and to time and death.*

Hagi Kenaan. *Photography and Its Shadow*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, March 2020, 248 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 9781503606364, paperback ISBN: 9781503611375.

**ASSAF EVRON** Your new book, *Photography and Its Shadow*, was published just as the world changed on us. The book was written, of course, before this challenging time of COVID-19, but it captures, I think, something deep about the way we live with images which is very relevant also to understanding the new roles of the image—say, the Zoom image, or that of the police body-camera—that we have experienced in the last few months.

**HAGI KENAAN** I think you're right, but we would need to tell a wider story to explain this.

**AE** Okay. Let's begin. *Photography and Its Shadow* is not a photo theory book in the traditional sense. You are offering a thorough philosophical investigation of photography, but your approach avoids a definitive answer to the question of what photography is.

**HK** The book offers an understanding of what photography is, but it resists a common way of framing the question about photography's essence. Unlike those central texts—you know, the classics of photography theory—that search for the determinative struc-



FIGURE 1. *Philosophy and the Visual Zoom* seminar, Tel Aviv University, April 2020. Screenshot. Image credit: Y. Ron.

ture or the “identity” of the photographic, I address photography as a complicated, multi-layered phenomenon whose identity is constantly changing. For me, change is the key to a philosophy of photography.

**AE** What’s at stake in this methodological shift—are you thinking about photography through its temporality? Or is your approach more historical?

**HK** My interest in photography’s changing conditions is ultimately ontological. But I think that an ontology of this kind is inseparable from a historical understanding of photography. History is important because it allows us to see that photography has never been one with itself—never self-same nor constant in meaning. Photography, unlike the way Roland Barthes and his followers had it, is never (only) a form of memorialization or be-reavement. And neither is it the opposite: not, as James Elkins and other materialists put it, a mode of presentation of the mere “stuff,” the dullness of what our world is made of. The point is that photography simply cannot be articulated in positive terms, such as “Photography is ABC” or “Photography is XYZ.”

**AE** So what is the alternative you’re suggesting?



FIGURES 2-5. Hagi Kenaan, from the *Tree with No Shadow/Shadow with No Tree*, DC series (2017). Manipulated photographs. Images courtesy of the photographer.

**HK** I think that we should approach photography dialectically, that is, in terms of its evolving relationship to itself, its self-determination which has changed again and again in forming what has become photography's history.

**AE** You speak about photography in terms of dynamic, evolving relationships. But photography's relation to itself ultimately opens up as a question about the intimate relationship we, humans, have with photography, the ways in which we live with photographs, and the dimension of the photographic. This perspective involves an important shift. It's not any more



FIGURE 6. Hagi Kenaan, *Face in Tree, Pennsylvania*. Photograph. Image courtesy of the photographer.

a subject–object relationship but a question of *being with* photography.

**HK** Yes, photography is woven into our lives in so many ways. It has become an integral part of the fabric of modern life. And at the same time, we need to remember that its status as a hegemonic kind of image belongs to a relatively short episode—probably a passing chapter—in the human history of being with images.



FIGURE 7. Carleton Watkins, *Multnomah Falls, Oregon* (1867). Photograph. Image courtesy of the Getty Open Content Program.

- AE** Photography is so central to our lives, and at this particular time—the time of the pandemic—it seems that our being with photography is even more intense and intimate than ever before. In the book, you reflect on a triangular relation of the visible, the visual and the virtual, which offer a relevant toolbox for thinking of the “pandemic subject.” What can the histories of photography tell us about our pandemic time?
- HK** The “visible,” “visual,” and “virtual” are key concepts for thinking of images. The visible has to do with the appearance of the environment to a living, embodied eye immersed in modes of

seeing. Having a surrounding world that is visible to us is something we share with animal life. When, on a hike, we see the big rocks that have rolled down the slope and blocked our path, the surroundings are visible to us just as they were to the deer who stood there earlier.

The visual, on the other hand, has to do with the *visualization* of the visible and is therefore most clearly manifest in cultures in which image-making is central. In the domain of the visual, the tree is transformed into a picture of a tree and its meanings become part of the literary matrix of language. The visual is anchored in a second-order human relation to what is seen. And one of the main features it inserts into the visible is a frame structure. The visual is an enframed visibility which, as such, appears as a totality: an inherently relational matrix that, under certain circumstances, can separate itself from the visibility of nature and assert its independence.

When the visual turns its back on the visible, the *virtual* comes to life. The caesura from nature allows images to act as autonomous: to forget their roots and replace nature with a visual excess we might call an image pandemic. A common context in which this happens is when technical algorithms establish themselves as the rule of the visual.

- AE** But given this proliferation, can we nevertheless talk about photography's origin or actual beginnings? Wouldn't you want to say that photography was plural from the start, "photographies" rather than "photography"?
- HK** That's a great question. The story I tell has a beginning which is the invention of photography. But this is not a simple, discrete starting point as much as a complicated moment caught in between its pasts and futures. The book is interested in the birth of photography as a traumatic event that ruptured our life with images. And, as in a birth trauma, photography's inception could become meaningful only retroactively. More specifically, I show that from its very beginning, photography needed to hide its mechanical birthmark, whose presence created a contradiction that it could not contain. This contradiction was precisely what opened up photography's new visuality, but at the same time, it was also what prevented photography from grounding the meaningfulness of its images. Haunted by a void, I argue that photography had to negotiate different strategies in order to



FIGURE 8. W. H. F. Talbot, *Photomicrograph of Insect Wings* (ca. 1840). Photomicrograph. Public domain.



FIGURE 9. W. H. F. Talbot, *The Haystack* (ca. 1841). Salted paper print from paper negative. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Public domain.



FIGURE 10. W. H. F. Talbot, *A Peony Leaf Above Leaves of a Species of Chestnut* (n.d.). Photogenic drawing. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY Public Access Initiative.

assert itself as meaningful and come into its own as a distinctive pictorial medium.

**AE** You are particularly interested in the British inventor of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot, and his book—the first book with photographs—*The Pencil of Nature* (1844). It is not merely his achievement of being one of the very first to invent a

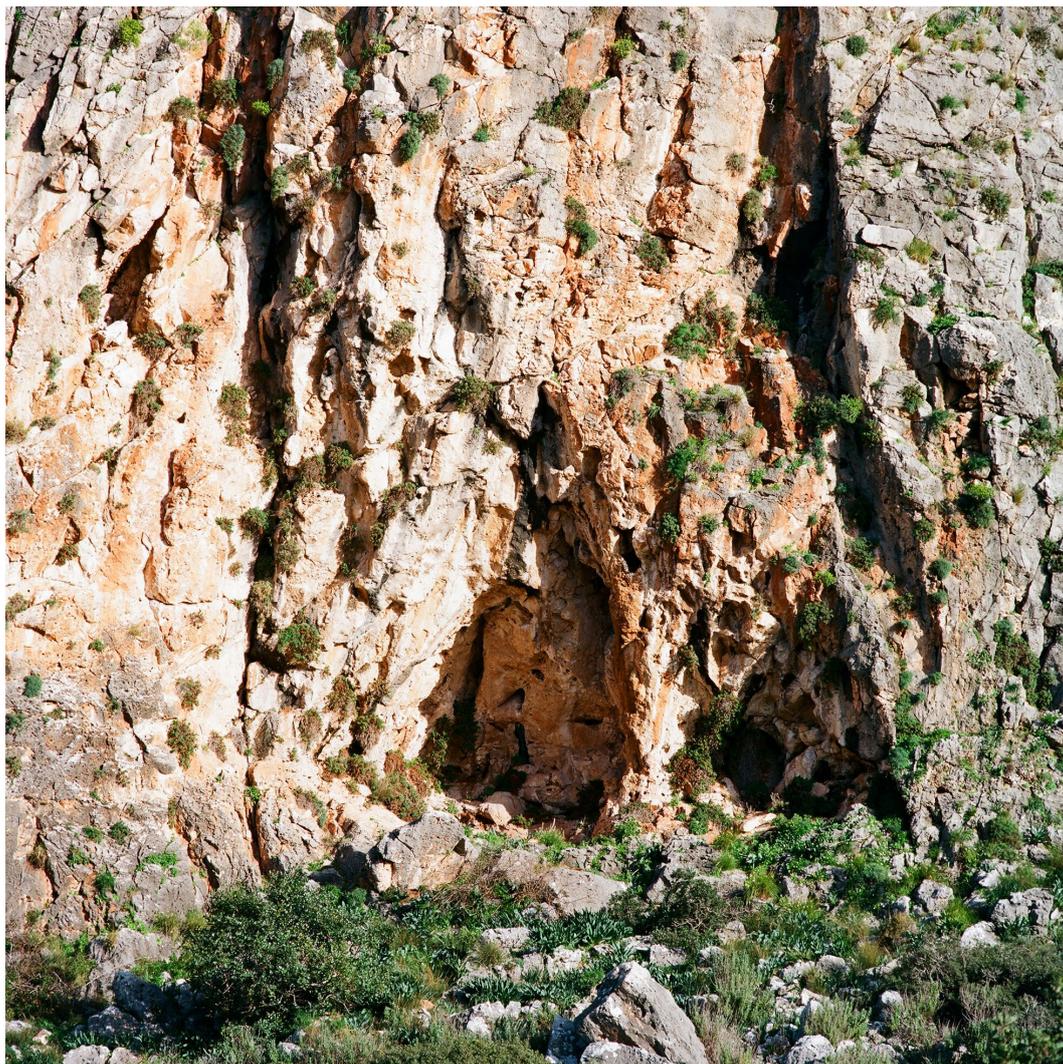


FIGURE 11. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Carmel Caves)* (2019). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

photographic process that makes him such an important figure for you, but rather the kind of relationship he proposed with the new medium. What was Talbot's role in shaping what you describe as a new visual era?

**HK** Talbot is an intriguing figure. He was an empirical scientist, but also a philologist and a humanist with an interesting historical consciousness. On a philosophical level, however, I first of all see in him a proto-phenomenologist: a thinker attuned to the question of phenomena. This is also what makes him so attentive to nature and the experience of shadows. It is precisely his original



FIGURE 12. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *Fossils and Shells* (ca. 1839). Daguerreotype. Public domain.

understanding of shadows that opens up, for him, the path to an invention of a new image-making process.

**AE** However, with the publication of *The Pencil of Nature* Talbot shifted his approach to photography: from a phenomenology of the shadow to a more mechanistic view of the natural world.

**HK** You're right. This tension between his phenomenological sensibility, his attentiveness to and love of nature and, on the other hand, his "cost-effective" determination to instrumentalize nature, is clearly seen already in his early epithet for the invention: photography, for him, was the "Art of Fixing Shadows." Whereas the interest in shadows grows out of an understanding of nature's self-expressivity, the idea of fixing shadows points in the opposite direction. It resonates with the mechanistic transformation and control over natural appearances. Photography as a "fixed" or morphed shadow is, in fact, a mutilation of nature's gift which is intrinsically temporal and evanescent. Given that shadows originally belong to the condition of whatever is "under the sun," photography's transmutation of the shadow is, in

my view, a new stage in our human relation to the phenomenal-ity of nature. And this is ultimately tied to the evolution of the "pandemic subject" you mentioned earlier.

**AE** There is an important point here: what is interesting about the Victorian approach to nature is not what we can learn about nature itself but rather how nature appears as a construct. How nature operates within culture. And photography seems to be playing a big role in this story not only in relation to nature but in a deeper sense.

**HK** The figure of "the pencil of nature" resonates with this precise duality. Nature ultimately needs *techne*. And *techne* not only originates in nature, but also marks the incompleteness of nature. Photography's initial love of nature goes hand in hand with the separation from nature whose eventual consequences are the destruction and disappearance of nature.

**AE** So, there are also ecological implications here—

**HK** —Yes, which can be seen, for example, in the early-twentieth-century ads for hand cameras where hunting becomes the prevalent analog or metaphor for the practice of photography: "If you want to take it, take it with a Kodak," or, "There are no game laws for those who hunt with a Kodak." The underlying assumption is that nature is at man's disposal, available for consumption. At the same time, we also hear in these ads the echoes of the game laws and conservationism of the early twentieth century with its growing realization that nature and natural resources are, in fact, exhaustible. In this sense, the camera was a perfect tool for sublimating that urge to exploit nature by offering a sustainable alternative that adhered to newly established conservationist restraints.

**AE** For that reason photography also had a major role in colonialism: the shift from thinking about nature itself to nature as understood by culture is connected to one of the key ideas in *Photography and Its Shadow*. Photography expands this "Kantian shift" from nature itself to the visible world at large.

**HK** Yes. The appearance of nature, the field of natural phenomena, whose traditional sense was that of "the visible," can no longer be understood independently of the virtual. One of the book's



FIGURE 13. Apollo 17, *The Blue Marble* (1972). Photograph. Public domain.

main concerns is to articulate the role of photography in this radical transformation, which furthermore bears heavily on the future trajectories of the photographic. I think that it is only in our age, the digital age of the connected image, of satellites and drones, of Google Glass and GoPro, that the logical consequences of this initial transformation have fully materialized. And, here, I argue that it is precisely the fulfilment of photography's logical essence that marks, today, the dissolution of the photographic.

**AE** There is a certain uniqueness to photography's visuality, which is also connected to the question of representation. There is a gap between the thing and its photographic representation (on



FIGURE 14. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Bauhaus, Wadi Musa)* (2019). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the photographer.

its various mechanisms). There is a gap or a difference between the visible and the visual that our imagination or photographic imagination is bridging over.

**HK** The imagination is an important prism for thinking about photography. And it's interesting that Kant revolutionizes this philosophical concept precisely at the time of the first experimentations with photography, at the end of the eighteenth century.

Up until Kant, the imagination was understood in opposition to actual perception, taken as the ability to *imagine*, i.e., to create fantasy or utopia. For Kant, however, the imagination has yet another more fundamental sense which is not at all

opposed to visual perception. For him, the fact that vision can frame meaningful appearances—can see what’s on the table, for example, *as* a flower vase—is a significant achievement that is made possible by the faculty of the imagination. The imagination is the *modus operandi* by which an image becomes (legible as) an image. Analogously, I suggest we think of photography’s imagination as the mode, the conditions, the visual mechanism, by which the visible takes on the form of a photograph.

- AE** I think that the conversation about the imagination is really important here, and that it’s not only how the imagination conditions photography but also how photography shapes our imagination. In a way, photography enables this sort of imagination just by the way that you’re looking at my photograph or my image or when you try now, when we communicate on Zoom, to make sense of or to construct the space behind me which is wider and richer than the one that appears on your screen. In this sense, it’s really fruitful to talk of this Kantian idea in a way that goes hand in hand with the visuality of the photographic.
- HK** To say that photography has an imagination of its own is to imply that it does not function as a passive imprint of some given visibility. The imagination, as Kant had it, is “productive.” And the question is what we make of this shaping power that photography has in visualizing the world, for us. This question was also central to the initial nineteenth-century debate, around the artfulness of photography. Does photography enhance or kill the imagination?
- AE** In *Photography and Its Shadow*, you speak of both Baudelaire and Benjamin who, in different ways and in different times, saw the delimiting effects which the photographic has on the imagination. But unlike Baudelaire, who saw the negative sides of photography, Benjamin had a way around this negativity and was also open to the productive qualities of photography’s visuality. How do you understand Benjamin’s position on the imagination?
- HK** You’re right that Benjamin, like Baudelaire, recognizes the advent of a new, mechanically based, visuality; and that Benjamin, unlike Baudelaire, is also attracted to the genuinely new visual possibilities opened by the camera’s mechanical eye. He is in-

trigued by the space of the photographic which the embodied eye can retroactively look at (through images) without ever being part of that space. What's unique about photographic images, he tells us, is that they don't develop from the eye's conscious—fully intended—appropriation of the visible, but depend rather on an optics that brings into play dimensions of reality that typically remain invisible to the eye in its ordinary routines. Photography's ability to articulate for the eye dimensions that were previously invisible is where his intriguing notion of the "optical unconscious" comes into the picture.

- AE** The Marxist in Benjamin is indeed interested in the camera as a mode of production, a mechanical eye whose visuality produces a new objectivity. However, for you, this is just another attempt to ground and anchor photography.
- HK** Benjamin's "optical unconscious" opened a truly new path for a dynamic, nonpositivistic articulation of photographic representation. The background for that was the modernist exploration of photography's machine structure which was clearly an exciting moment. This modernist vision not only allowed for new and surprising experimentations, but, in a sense, also brought photography closer to itself (to its mechanistic essence). At the same time, we need to notice that in embracing the technological as its essence, modern photography reproduced yet another metanarrative that obscured its groundlessness and asserted, instead, the identity of its visuality.
- AE** Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," ties photography's machine vision to the degeneration of the fullness of human experience. This is an idea that has become even more relevant in the current pandemic, when virtual images are replacing in-person experiences. However, photography also has deep roots in another important paradigm, one that coincides with the human existential drama: the drama of loss, memory, and desire, or what you call in the book the "Butades complex" in reference to a myth that originated in the ancient world, which was revived in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting, and which has become crucial for photography.



FIGURE 15. Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Corinthian Maid* (1782–85). Oil on canvas, 106.3 x 130.8 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

**HK** Pliny’s tale of the maid of Corinth who faces the imminent departure or death of her lover and who draws on her wall an outline of his cast shadow enjoyed great popularity in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture; and as photography came on stage, it adopted this origin scene (associated with the birth of drawing) as if it were its own. It was important for photography, from its very beginning, to locate itself at that intersection of *eros* and *thanatos*, and to imagine itself, like drawing and painting, as developing from a natural negative, a shadow, that belongs, in both the literal and figurative sense, to the core of human life in which desire and love is ineluctably suffused with absence and death. In Pliny’s ancient imaginary, photography found the features it needed in order to establish its own primal scene: the copy, the trace, the index, and the positive–negative relation, as well as more general “transcendental” themes such as the triangular structure of presence,

absence, and re-presentation, or, when taking a more psychoanalytic guise, of a desired object, loss, and substitution.

**AE** Here again, photography, the orphaned child, is appropriating a well-established myth of the origin in order to make it its own. Do you think the assimilation of this tale of origin reflects photography's need for legitimacy and a desire to be part of the long history of painting?

**HK** Yes, but this would only be one aspect of the story. The "Butades complex" is yet another photographic metanarrative that upholds the meaningfulness of photography's images by rooting them in the drama of human transience and the imperative of memorialization.

**AE** Although photography from its very beginning was looking for legitimacy within traditional artistic media, it took almost a century from its invention for it to be fully recognized as art. By saying this I mean that only then did museums start to collect photography and have departments that specialize in photography. And in this context, photography's ability to capture and articulate the human drama or the human condition—its singularities and universal aspects—also defined the discourse of photography as contemporary art.

**HK** I think that this understanding has been one of the most prevalent and consistently effective strategies in the history of photography. It's especially interesting how since the 1970s the Butades picture has resurfaced in new guises. You can find it at the heart of Roland Barthes, or Victor Burgin's photography theory, and then in a whole spectrum of very different photographers from Lee Friedlander to Steven Shore to Richard Avadon to Nan Goldin to Sally Mann and up to even Sophie Calle who all, in different ways, are possessed by the photograph's ability to touch (into) the passing of time and to hold onto the memory of bygone moments.<sup>1</sup> This typically goes together with a whole ethos of the embodied involvement of the photographer in the actuality of life, of situations, of events.

1 For a more detailed discussion of all of these figures, see *Photography and Its Shadow*. For Barthes, see 89–105; for Friedlander and Shore, see 126–30; for Goldin, see 178–82; for Calle, see 182–86.

**AE** But if these are only metanarratives, what is actually the truth of photography? In your book, Nietzsche and his perspectivism have an important role. Can you explain how Nietzsche's philosophy is relevant for understanding photography?

**HK** Nietzsche, for me, is the first and, in many ways, the most interesting photo philosopher. Born in 1844, he belongs to a generation whose world has just become photographable. Nietzsche's explicit comments on photography are few, but the basic concepts of his radical philosophy offer unique tools for articulating the new logic of appearance that was brought about by photography. This is a logic of appearance that has only today become manifest with our current visual technologies. Moreover, Nietzsche thinks of man as an animal whose constitution is still open, and in this sense the history of technology can, in principle, shape who we are to become.

**AE** What Nietzschean concepts are you specifically thinking of?

**HK** I'm thinking of a "square" of concepts which consists of Nietzsche's "Death of God," "perspectivism," "eternal recurrence," and "the will to power."

Let me say something about the first two ideas (which are at the center of Part III of *Photography and Its Shadow*). Photography, as I understand it, emerges with the death of God, a condition marked by the disintegration of a unifying frame through which the world's meaning can coherently show itself. The death of God is the collapse of the possibility of an overarching principle that could uphold human value and meaning. When a world—or a universe—becomes a homogeneous, valueless, "godless" space, all that is left are perspectives, points of view, that are equally valid and equally meaningful or meaningless. This is perspectivism, which I take to be fundamental to the being of photography. For Nietzsche, only "the artistically creative subject" is willing to accept the perspectival structure of the real and experience the "vast confusion of contradictory perspectives" ((1873) 1999, 148).

**AE** But how exactly is photography tied to perspectivism?

**HK** The primal fact of photography is the separation of the image-making device from the human body (the embodied eye, the hand). This has created an irreversible—albeit inconspicuous—



FIGURE 16. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Sodom and Gomorrah)* (2016). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

ous—caesura between the domain of images and our embodied ways of seeing and making sense of the visible. Photographers can, of course, still take an embodied stance in relation to their work. But the inner logic of the mechanical apparatus is perspectival. Think here of Talbot's first cameras, the "mouse traps" which he placed throughout the grounds of his estate in Lacock. What was innovative about them was that they were not anchored in the vision of an embodied living subject. They were "neutral" viewpoints, perspectives, that belong to an extended, infinite field of options for visual representation.

- AE** The question to be asked here is how the divide between the photographic apparatus and the human body affect the visual field?
- HK** The autonomy of the visual apparatus means that every point in space becomes a potential point of view for taking a photograph. When this is the case, then the visualization of the visible becomes essentially limitless. Everything visible can, in principle, become photographically visual from an indefinite number of perspectives. In this sense, the logic of photography is imperialistic (apropos your earlier point about photography and colonialism). And yet, photography's rule of the visible is neither centralized nor coherent. What photography created is a visuality that consists of an indefinite multitude of viewpoints that are equally valid and that refuse to coalesce. The photographic appearance of a human face, for example, is indiscriminately attached and equally indifferent to what is seen from the eye of another person, an insect, or a satellite. The "same" photographed face can take the form of a traditional, frontal, "humanistic" portrait, but it may even lose its human character altogether and appear as an alien creature or, in an extreme closeup, as a field of pores and bumps, as mere organic matter.
- AE** I guess this bears on photography's central metanarratives. I can see how this undermines Roland Barthes's position, that is, his grounding of photography's essence in the access it gives us viewers to the "That has been," or as he terms it, "the Intractable."<sup>2</sup>
- HK** Exactly. If photography can only offer us perspectives, how can it claim to frame for us a bygone moment or an original event? Its perspectivism doesn't allow photography to uphold any self-identical form or sense, since it has no logos, no way of arbitrating, no way of privileging certain facts over others—it only has perspectives. And today, more than ever, it is gradually turning its perspectivism into the inner rule of the visible which serves an all-encompassing capitalist visual order in leveling the sphere of everyday experience. The question here, I take it, is whether photography still has a future in which it could find

2 For fuller discussion of this idea, see *Photography and Its Shadow*, 98–105.

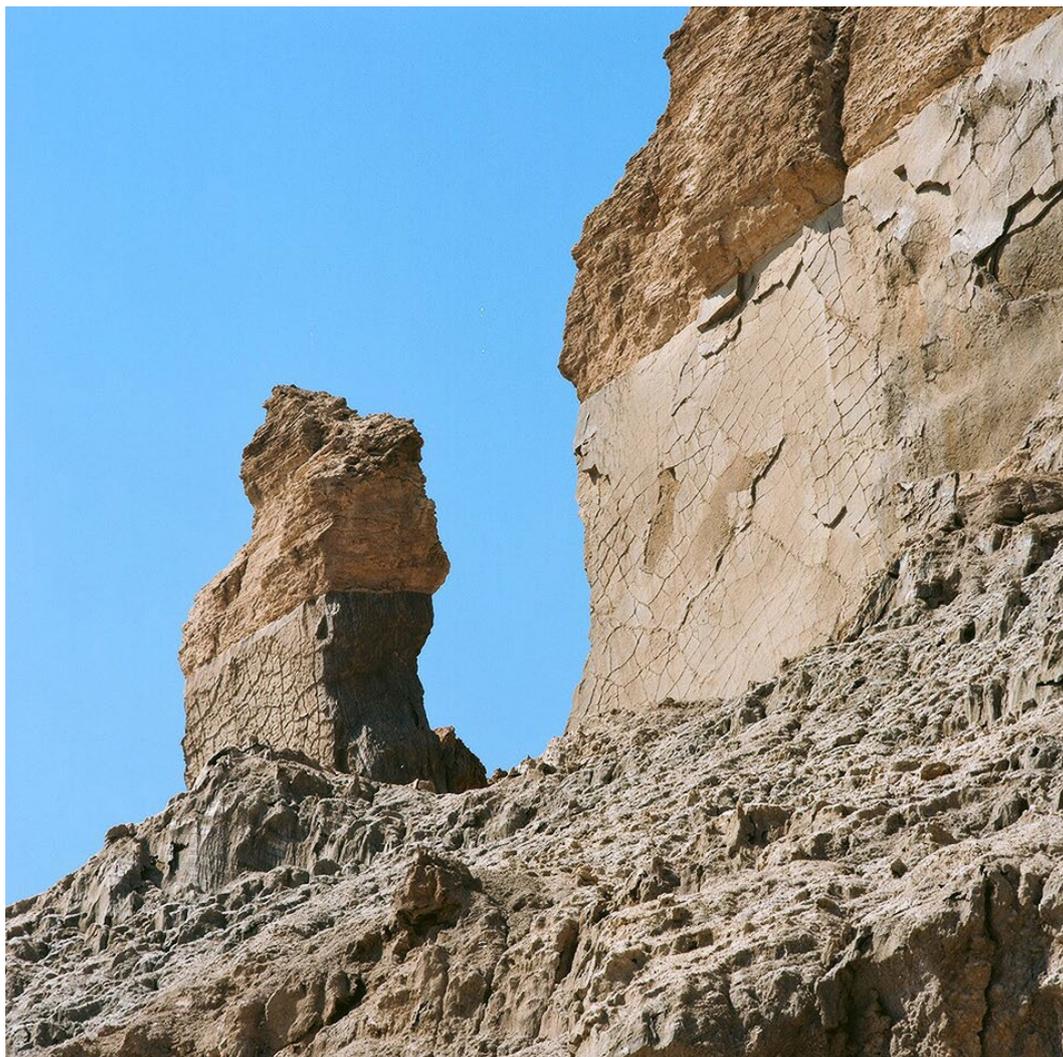


FIGURE 17. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Lot's Wife)* (2016). Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

alternatives to the logic of the new capitalism, alternatives that depend on new creative ways of seeing.

**AE** Today, there is a lot of pressure on artists and intellectuals to respond to the new situation, and to articulate how the difficulty we're experiencing thanks to COVID-19 can also be an opportunity. For me this past year has been quite paralyzing, but there was something about our conversation and this uncertain time of the pandemic that motivated me to go out with a large-format camera, something that I rarely do, and photograph around my house and studio, my neighborhood in Chicago. But, to return to

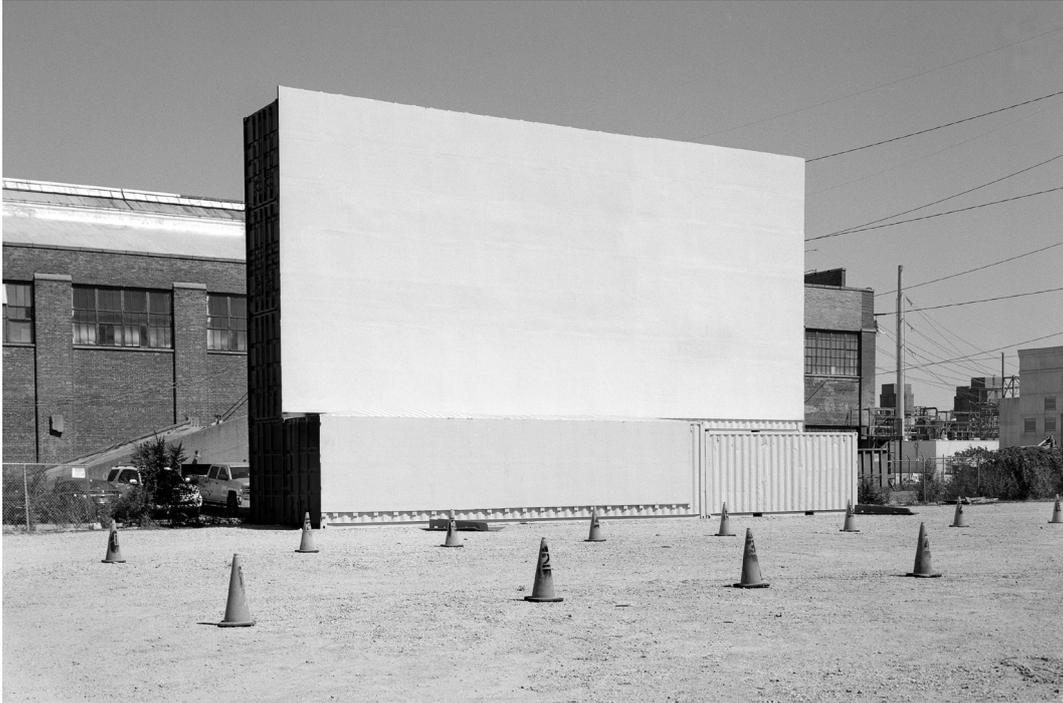


FIGURE 18. Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Pandemic Drive In)*, 2020. Archival inkjet print, 101.6 × 101.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

the book, how does it help us in responding to questions about the presence of images in these trying days of COVID-19?

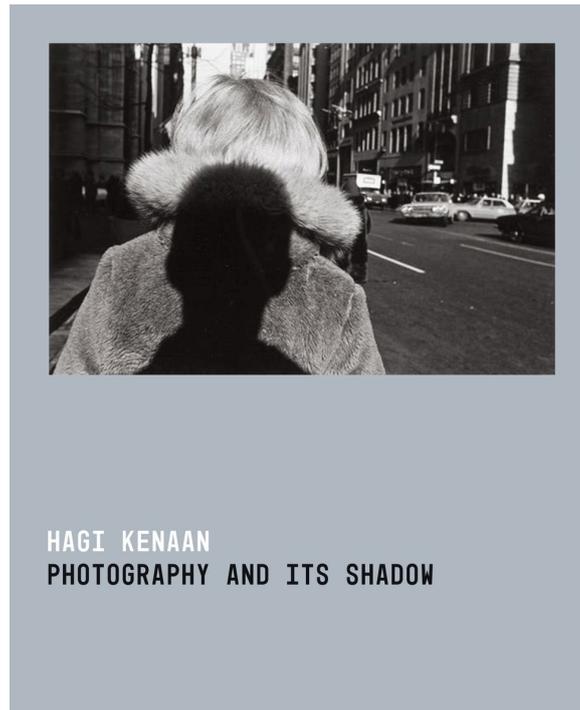
**HK** The book's starting point is that photography is an *Existential*. That's a term borrowed from Heidegger to describe the very basic structures of human existence. As such, the question of the photographic image should be articulated and answered in terms of who we are, who we have become and who we are becoming. In other words, the future of the image is the future of humanity and vice versa. The last few months accelerated and accentuated the presence of processes that were already there. Some of these processes are alarming not only in the threat they pose to human freedom and to basic forms of being social, but also because they play a formative part in the emergence of a new subjectivity: the "pandemic subject" that ties so well into the phantasmatic visuality of apps such as FaceApp, an AI-based portrait editing app, and, on the other hand, the visuality of images that are products of current surveillance technologies. But the perspectivism we talked about can also be a key to new, subversive, alternative ways of doing things with images.

A CONVERSATION ON HAGI KENAAN'S "PHOTOGRAPHY AND ITS SHADOW"

- AE** So the “pandemic subject” presents another metanarrative for photography: connectivity at the times of physical distancing, striving to create a web of intersubjective relationships—I can think of all kinds of interesting performances with Zoom—on one hand, and surveillance and control on the other.
- HK** The image, I think, is never one thing or another. It always comes double because humans are open ended creatures. It is typically part of a metanarrative, but, also, in its futurity, it is part of an openness to new possibilities, new forms of life. While the photographic is, today, in so many ways embedded into—and serves—the mechanisms of a surveillance society, it has also been central, as we’ve seen in the last few months, to acts of protest and genuine solidarity, as we have seen this year in the US and Israel, the countries in which each of us lives these days.



FIGURE 19. Assaf Evron and Hagi Kenaan, Zoom Conversation. Credit: Assaf Evron.



**Hagi Kenaan** (Ph.D., Yale University) is a professor of philosophy and the Chair of the Philosophy Department at Tel Aviv University. He specializes in twentieth-century continental philosophy, with particular attention to aesthetics and the philosophy of art. In recent years, his work has focused on the ontology and ethics of images, from cave art to street art to photography and VR.

Kenaan is co-editor of *Philosophy's Moods: The Affective Grounds of Thinking* (Springer, 2011). He is also the author of *The Present Personal: Philosophy and the Hidden Face of Language* (Columbia University Press, 2005), *The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze* (Tauris, 2013), and, most recently, *Photography and Its Shadow*.

**Assaf Evron** is an artist and a photographer based in Chicago. His work investigates the nature of vision and the ways in which it reflects in socially constructed structures, where he applies photographic thinking in various two and three-dimensional media. Looking at moments along the histories of modernism, Evron questions the construction of individual and collective identities, immigration (of people, ideas, and images), and the representations of democracy.

His work has been exhibited in galleries and museums internationally including the Museum for Contemporary Art in Chicago, Crystal Bridges Museum for American Art, and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Evron holds an MA from the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at Tel Aviv University, as well as an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where he currently teaches.

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