Crossing Over: Interactions with(in) the Permeable Screen

by

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Abstract

Within American culture, the television is arguably one of the more common modes of social discourse and entertainment. However, there are a number of literary responses to the medium (as well as other screen devices) that aim to reflect upon the overwhelming and psychically damaging nature of viewership. The purpose of this project is to investigate a number of plays and novels alongside television and digital media to examine the effects of the screen (TV and computer) in relation to the embodiment of its viewer/user. Chapter One focuses on Jean-Claude van Itallie's *TV* and *Eat Cake*, two plays that posit a televised image that has corporeal weight and influence over social reality. Chapter Two examines how Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play* expounds upon a similar idea to that of Chapter One, focusing on an image that leaves the screen only to problematize the realm of the real. Chapter Three examines Adult Swim's *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" as a form of comparison to demonstrate that, though the television series and the short story (respectively) are separated by over 50 years, similar concerns appear in American culture in both, namely the idea that death can be made manifest in the screen. Both emphasize the passivity of the viewer as well as the captive nature of the screen, reconfiguring both the social coordinates of its viewers and cultural memory, especially in relation to the deconstructed binary of life and death. Chapter Four moves away from television screens to examine digital spaces more closely in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. The reason for this shift in medium is precisely because television and the Internet are more closely entwined with each other now, and similar concerns from the earlier

media arise in this one as well. I conclude that these various discourses demonstrate a need to reflect on the screen as a device capable of modifying the social sphere as well as our conception of embodiment. Though the screen itself is a powerful mechanism, I suggest an examination of its placement in American culture and self-reflection by its viewers/users to understand its effects and to prevent the problems demonstrated by these varying media: full immersion in the image as a new form inseparable from reality.

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Introduction

Screening Image and Reality:

Initial Preoccupations with a Powerful Medium

"I watch TV. It's the next best thing to being alive."
~Fry from *Futurama*[1]

With the rise of portable screen devices that ensure perpetual connectivity, reality continues towards increasing mediation. Screens are ubiquitous in American culture to the point that they are almost everywhere: restaurants, homes, schools, in pockets, in hands. These screens have the potential to connect people across long distances and to present information very readily. As technology develops exponentially, new devices overlap with older ones: one can watch TV on the phone, make calls from watches, have automated programs read text messages through car speakers. To a degree, these present a level of ease, which in itself is not negative. The facilitation of communication can impact relationships in healthy ways, connect people more globally than ever, &c.

However, the complicity with which the screen is treated in American culture can at times be problematic in that ease is often paired with deteriorating self-reflection and self-awareness. Recent commercials suggest that one can only pay attention to the road while driving for so long before a car wreck becomes inevitable – unless one buys the car with an automatic brake system.[2] The suggestion is that it is virtually impossible for one to assume a level of agency required on the road, that the deficit in attention is not in itself an issue so much as

[1] "Reincarnation," *Futurama: Volume Six*, written by Aaron Ehasz, directed by Peter Avanzino, (20th Century Fox, 2010), DVD.

[2] See "All New 2016 Hyundai Elantra Auto Emergency Braking With Pedestrian Detection Commercial Ads," *YouTube*, uploaded by Commercials, 9 April 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bS19g7Va6jg. In this particular commercial, two women – one driver and one passenger – travel through a town filled with multiple people, all of whom happen to be actor Ryan Reynolds. The car stops *for* them when they are too preoccupied with watching the man, so much so that they almost run him over.

something that can be overcome with the latest purchase. Now, this is not to vilify these technologies or to devolve into a rant against the state of technology as things are right now. Instead, I aim to interrogate the use of these technologies in relation to the body and how the user is positioned, especially in terms of viewership. As animated sitcom *Futurama*'s lazy deliveryman Fry humorously states above, lived experience and televised media are closely related. In his hierarchical organization, life comes first and TV second. Still, the uncanny connection here links the two very closely, dissolving the dividing line. Arguably, the line has worn thin: watching TV, using the Internet, and communicating through screens are all part of lived experience; these activities are commonplace aspects of life, extensions of the human condition. However, the availability of these technologies and their respective purposes beg the question of their use and their relative effect on the human body and psyche.

In particular, devices are rearranging social performance and how the body is situated within the circuit. In "Transforming Your Skin into a Touchscreen" on *psfk*, Janet Burns writes, "The booming wearables industry strives to keep users connected while exercising, working, and even eating. One new company [i.e. Cicret] wants to pack a number of features into a small, screen-free band that will keep wearers online anywhere - even in the tub" (Burns). First, we see the competition on the market for a device that can be used anywhere: who can make the first phone that is functional in water? The question arises of the necessity of a phone in the tub, though: why is technology infiltrating every aspect of private life? There is a sense of amusement with the smartphone that can fulfill basic desires, and expanding it into the private sphere allows for further extensions: one can pass time in the tub, relax by playing games, kill time by paying bills and taking care of other socioeconomic requirements, or (more physically)

fulfilling masturbatory fantasy in a private environment. In each of the cases, the phone screen is a direct manifestation of the desire of the body, providing instant gratification.

Regardless of the purpose, the context here implies a deep reordering of how the screen functions in this personal sphere. The competition to make a phone that is hydrophilic, so to speak, has given rise to a new model of communication devices, but Cicret aims to go beyond this by eliminating most of the standard parts of the apparatus: "the Cicret Bracelet uses a pico projector to cast a navigation and display 'screen' on a user's arm, as well as eight proximity sensors to detect swipes, clicks, and other motions from a user's finger in the display area" (Burns). With the screen absent, the user becomes an extension of the interface rather than the other way around. The human body becomes a form of digitally coded communication: the body *is* the apparatus.[3] Hand gestures and modes of touch are reduced to a form of primitive clicks. The articulation of human contact is reduced to GUI instead of skin.

As gestures are essentially a representation of human emotion, the repositioning of the body must, then, have a psychological reordering as well. Consider the use of textspeak, technological metaphors, and construction of new verbs mediating a technocentric communication. We "Google" someone to learn her occupation. We "text," the word ceasing to be a noun so much as a performance. We "facebook" a friend to get in touch ("touch," of course, being ironically absent in this colloquialism). According to Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, "it seems that technological change inevitably challenges old, existing communities. The particulars of each case, however, are valuable to our larger understanding of how media help to shape and reshape culture" (xv). New media have a habit of modifying previous

[3] Although one could posit that, scientifically speaking, the body is "coded" by DNA, or, through a posthuman lens, as a component of a social circuit, I mean to say that the body is essentially reduced to data in this particular scenario.

structures of communication and entering the dominant discourse. A new lexicon emerges, and society is generally dictated by the modes of technology.

However, can the screen rightly be called "new media?" The device is dated, even if it evolves over the years into smaller and more portable means of viewership. TV, the Internet, and a myriad of other devices may develop new uses and iterations, but this is true of old media as well. The immersion of the viewer in the screen and the simulation therein is an already dated concept. Consider *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950-1958) and its incessant use of product placement in episode narratives. Constant reminders of the multiple uses of Carnation Evaporated Milk[4] in a domestic setting certainly ring of delight, but underlying these is the attempt of TV to enter conversation with reality. The purpose of product placement and commercials is to sell a product or lifestyle, but the method through which this show hides it under the surface (albeit awkwardly as characters abruptly give smilingly bright explanations as to recipes and uses of the product at length) suggests that the image attempts to enter into conversation with lived experience in a simulated "natural" discussion. The fourth wall is not broken in this show, but it does reveal something of the inherent nature of television in relation to the viewer: the viewer is always directly connected to a suggestive and persuasive medium. Even if this is a lighter example of how the TV infiltrates domestic life in playful ways, the image has moved in more sinister directions lately.

Though there has been a longstanding conversation regarding the relation of mediation to reality proper, there has been an increase in the unsettling visions of the screen and its ability to

[4] For example, see "VINTAGE 1951 GEORGE BURNS CARNATION EVAPORATED MILK COMMERCIAL," *YouTube*, uploaded by TV TOY MEMORIES, 8 November 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q44iT8TRdgw. In this scene, the dialogue is almost close to natural. Almost. The awkwardness arises when Bill Goodwin berates George Burns for not remembering the multiple uses of Carnation Evaporated Milk and proceeds to explain how to make whole milk out of it, step by step. The dialogue itself functions decently enough, but the forced nature of the product placement makes it blatantly known that this is advertising.

rewrite what we consider real. The rise of the catfish narrative,[5] the fascination with digital hauntings and horror stories, the preoccupation with dystopian societies centered on the television: these are just a number among many current anxieties. Whether televised or web-centered, these problems arise due to the mediation of the image. Released in 2002, the movie *FeardotCom* depicts a website that becomes a supernatural presence that replicates the initial death that spawned the force that drives the coded space: each person who visits the site dies in the same span of time as the woman who became the ghost.[6] Murder is mediated in this case as the ghost only plagues those who view the website, which is oddly specific. It seems that the spirit is only concerned with networking the murders rather than carrying them out with more traditional methods. In any case, the characters are removed from the initial crime, and they are only linked to it by its replication. In this way, the image of the screen *is* the direct consequence. Movies like *The Ring* (2002) present the screen as a doorway to supernatural murder, one in which the image has direct contact with the viewer. This narrative features a young girl named Samara, a malevolent child who reappears after her death through a VHS tape played on a TV. The evil spirit exits the screen and murders a number of victims throughout the course of the movie.[7] This horror emphasizes the fear in dissolving the line that separates (i.e. protects) us from the image. Even in parody, the film's central concept is elaborated upon in *Scary Movie 3* (2003), in which best friend Brenda alerts the protagonist, "Cindy, the TV's leaking" as water

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[5] The term "catfish" comes from the documentary *Catfish* (2010), which in turn inspired an MTV series of the same name. The premise behind both is a number of actual instances in which a person pretends to be someone else, often generating fake profiles and identities, to lure people into romantic interest, sometimes (but not always) for exploitative purposes. For an extensive etymological explanation of the term, see "Why is it called 'Catfish,'" *YouTube*, uploaded by Max Joseph, 12 November 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_9_WMc_WTI.
[6] *FeardotCom*, directed by William Malone, performances by Stephen Dorff, Natascha McElhone, and Stephen Rea, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2002.
[7] *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski, performances by Naomi Watts, Martin Henderson, and Brian Cox, DreamWorks Pictures, 2002.

pours from the screen prior to Samara's arrival.[8] Funny, yes, but the idea is replicated time and time again in popular fiction, examples which will be discussed in the following chapters. The water that runs out of the console comes out of a space it simply cannot, must not – yet it does. The very nature of this invasive image violates the coordinates that separate the screen from lived experience.

With new developments in the screen, more recent instances show the Internet infiltrating our lives. For example, alleged bans on certain names are appearing globally, ones particularly linked to web culture. According to Laura Stampler's report in *Time*, in 2014, "[t]he Mexican state of Sonora just banned parents from naming their children 61 names – and one of them is Facebook," which, she continues, "means that there's some kid named Facebook crawling around and poking people" (Stampler). This is a bizarre account circulating the web, one notable implication of which is that social networking directly influences social interaction, even to hyperbolic levels like this one. In extreme depictions, the Internet also steps through the screen. For example, [adult swim]'s late night comedy *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, a rather bizarre series, features multiple instances of the web permeating life. In the episode "Interfection" (2002), a wizard (or, rather, www.yzzerdd.com) with green skin, bald and bearded head, and a disturbing body that is presumably a large hand, causes a series of pop-up ads to infiltrate the house in which the series' titular characters live.[9] In "Video Ouija" (2004), which will appear extensively in my third chapter, a character named BillyWitchDoctor.com comes to the aid of the characters to attempt to revive a deceased Master Shake, one of the more antagonistic of the main characters.[10] In both cases, there's an odd hyperlinking that substitutes in for naming, suggesting

[8] *Scary Movie 3*, directed by David Zucker, performances by Anna Faris and Regina Hall, Miramax Films, 2003.
[9] "Interfection," *Aqua Teen Hunger Force: Volume One*, written by Dave Willis and Matt Maiellaro, directed by Dave Willis and Matt Maiellaro, (Cartoon Network, 2003), DVD.
[10] "Video Ouija," *Aqua Teen Hunger Force: Volume Four*, written by Dave Willis and Matt Maiellaro,

an overlap of social convention with digital media, as if the names lead to websites, as if the names perform roles more extensive than identification.[11] Further, the digital ads made manifest in physical space question the coded nature of each: is the advertisement physical if it enters our world (and what material is it made of), or is reality simply a string of hypertext in itself? The ontology of the physical is, thus, rendered suspect. Each of these examples demonstrates a causal link between image and reality, namely in that multiple screen devices determine social coordinates as well as writing bodily boundaries.

Still, the dissolution of this binary is not exclusive to TV. What I propose to examine within the scope of this project is a phenomenon within literature in which the text replicates the screen to some extent or otherwise emphasizes the power of the screen over the viewer. There is a notable trend within a number of literary texts in which the screen plays a significant part within the development of the narrative. Consider a text like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) that presents the web as a plausible three dimensional space, an extension of reality that is exclusive to hackers with the proper equipment.[12] But the internet-based thriller is not necessarily a new genre. This genre could arguably appear as early as texts like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909). In the former, pneumatic tubes transmit objects and information, even in the form of primitive audio streaming; Bellamy's anticipations of the future from his standpoint are not completely spot-on, but they do emphasize a potential for connectivity.[13] In the latter, Forster's dystopian vision of a hive-like society depicts communications through presumably digital mediation, almost an early

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directed by Dave Willis and Matt Maiellaro, (Cartoon Network, 2005), DVD.

[11] Strangely enough, www.yzzerdd.com is a functional hyperlink, a paratext to the show. In this case, the name doubles as identity and coded link.

[12] William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (New York: Ace, 1984). Print.

[13] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, *Project Gutenberg*, 30 August 2008, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/624/624-h/624-h.htm. Accessed 6 October 2016.

predecessor to what we have now in Skype.[14] With the advent of new technologies, literature responds to the times, sometimes anticipating technologies prior to their existence. According to David Foster Wallace in his article "*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction," this direct correlation is not entirely surprising. Wallace argues, "One of the most recognizable things about this century's postmodern fiction was the movement's strategic deployment of pop-cultural references – brand names, celebrities, television programs – in even its loftiest high-art projects" (166). The saturation of pop culture figures within literature renders high and low inseparable in this capacity, but even so the criticism of television is not rendered in light terms. Certainly authors like Thomas Pynchon play with pop culture in humorous ways, but this is often paired with densely emotional or otherwise deeply moving passages. Pop culture by its very nature is low art (if it can be called art at times), but the investigation of pop culture in literary works often demonstrates its severe impacts on culture at large and how it modifies the coordinates of social performance.

The purpose of this project is to address how literature represents the screen as well as to problematize how we define digital and televised space as separate from reality – the two are becoming increasingly indistinct from each other. Specifically, I aim to address the phenomenon of television (and other) screens appearing at length in literary and dramatic works alongside some televised broadcasts and digital media. As Wallace posits, there seems to be a long-standing trend of digital apparatuses discussed within literary texts at length. These texts serve as responses to issues in mass media and culture at large. I aim, then, to discuss issues of embodiment and lived experience, the relation of body to coded images as representations, and, ultimately, the indeterminate space presented within the screen as depicted within the texts I

[14] E. M. Forster, "The Machine Stops," *NCSA Web Archive*, n.d., http://archive.ncsa.illinois.edu/prajlich/forster.html. Accessed 6 October 2016.

have selected. Within each of the texts I examine, there is a discussion of how the screen directly impacts both the body as well as social performance. This project spans from early 1950s television to media as recent as the elusive Deep Web, emphasizing that although the technology evolves in its appearance, the same issues recur through time, namely an anxiety wherever the screen is concerned. From Ray Bradbury to Thomas Pynchon, the screen is a problematic space that is often treated with fear and ambivalence due to the horrifying images that inhabit it as well as the potential that comes with redefining reality itself. As the medium of expression changes with time, it may be expected that the medium of response will change as well. As such, I will examine dramatic texts alongside novels and short stories as the response to television appears in a number of literary avenues through the course of the late 20th and early 21st century. Thus, the framework of my project is mostly chronological with the purpose of emphasizing the shifts through time regarding the nature of embodiment in relation to the screen. Earlier texts tend to demonstrate that the image is directly related to a physical body and social performance through bodily actions. More recent texts tend to emphasize an overwhelming absence in not just the image, but the body. In these cases, image and body lose distinction, leaving the viewer/user with an ontological crisis: what is physical in the age of immateriality?

In the first chapter, I discuss two plays by Off-Off-Broadway playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie, *TV* (1966) and *Eat Cake* (1971). In particular, I focus on the way in which the boundary between the screen and reality is a performative membrane, one that is generally accepted socially but that can, in fact, be ruptured. In the first play, a group of "People on Television" end up infiltrating a viewing room. As these people are onstage rather than televised or projected, the initial separation between this group and the viewing room workers appears only in performance. Certainly this division is broken down by the end of the play as the viewing room workers start

acting like television sitcom archetypes, absorbed into the televised narrative. In the second play, a woman is metaphorically raped by an image from the TV, one that comes in the form of a man who forces the woman to eat cake and other desserts, as the title would suggest. By the end, she has gained an inordinate amount of weight. In both cases, the televised image determines social performance: the viewing room workers *become* characters; the woman's body is engorged by food an image makes her consume. In this way, I argue that these plays demonstrate both the performative separation of image and reality as well as the visceral weight that the image takes on when it steps out of the screen and enters our plane.

As this chapter focuses heavily on performative instances within the screen (and in the culture it impacts and defines), I rely on theories from Bert O. States predominately. His phenomenological approach begs the question of what happens onstage, demonstrating a crux between fact and fiction: the character *is* the actor, to an extent, but only the character suffers a literal fate. Expanding upon this theory, I discuss the similar liminal space of the screen. The viewer watches actions that happen but also don't: characters die, spectacular news repeats *ad infinitum*, reruns show the same fiction as a simultaneous past and present – this has all already happened; this has yet to happen (again). Still, there is a sense of alienation in the familiar images that play again and again. The question of what the audience/viewer watches is an underlying problem within this theory. As such, I further rely on Bertolt Brecht to explain the cultural impact that these images have, demonstrating that, though the image is familiar, it is a damaging figure that can have psychological (and physical) impacts on the viewer. In particular, this links with the ideas presented in *Eat Cake*: the image as a physical object, estranged from the screen and further so from the viewer. Through rendering something as common as dessert

unappetizing and disgusting, van Itallie emphasizes the darker side of consumerism that aims to make the viewer a passive consumer.

Continuing on this thread in the next chapter, I turn to Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play* (1944), particularly to discuss the underrepresented television that appears towards the end of the text. An odd situation arises in which the Foundling Father, a man who bears resemblance to Abraham Lincoln and recreates his assassination as a profession, comes back from the grave, summoned by this screen. The uncanny return of this figure emphasizes the liminal qualities of the television screen, namely in that it ceases to be just an image. Rather, it becomes a doorway for the deceased to return and enter our world, blurring the binary of image and reality. As with the previous chapter, lived experience becomes equated to the image of the screen. The TV becomes a liminal space through which the image steps onto the stage and, thus, into our world. Incorporating theoretical texts by Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard, namely their discussions concerning simulation, I aim to demonstrate that the image and reality are directly related, sometimes in disturbing ways that border on the uncanny, if not horrific. As the dead return through the screen, the nature of embodiment is called into question: can an image have physical weight? Parks' characters suggest a dilemma for treating the image as weightless, suggesting (like van Itallie) a corporeal being rather than a digital medium. However, the characters within the play treat this anomalous return with hesitation: it is, after all, an unusual spectacle.

Further, the very nature of the play in performance replicates this impossible space for the theater audience as discussed in the previous chapter: what does the audience witness? Using Herbert Blau's dramatic theories as a basis, I argue that the theater presents a space in which things simultaneously happen and don't. This is to say that the nature of acting is both fictional and real: to present a character's action onstage is to embody him, yet to act is also to present a

representation. Ultimately, the performative image, the action onstage, is given weight precisely *because* it is acted. In this way, both the performance onstage as well as the return of the Foundling Father ground the image as having a bizarre corporeality that directly interacts with our physical reality. To expand upon this idea, I also employ Baudrillard's theories to examine the image as a simulation. Where the image has a literal weight for Jean-Claude van Itallie, it seems to be called into question in Parks' play in terms of its physicality. In particular, it is noteworthy that, though the image steps out of the screen, it is repeatedly refused physical contact, almost a surrogate for the body itself without substance. The performative elements within the play (as read through Baudrillard) suggest that the screen image is entering reality and rendering it immaterial, further problematizing the position of the viewer in relation to the screen as well as to embodiment in general.

Following this, I turn to two pulp texts to examine more popular conceptions of television as a medium for the expression of the dead. The purpose of this chapter is to continue with the discussion of embodiment established above but also to offer a comparison between earlier conceptions of television with the more recent. In particular, the comparison serves to examine how two different media explore the similar problem through interestingly similar terms. In particular, I examine Ray Bradbury's short story "The Pedestrian" (1951) and [adult swim]'s surrealist cartoon *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, specifically the episode "Video Ouija" (2004) mentioned above. Culturally speaking, there is a trend of depicting screen devices as traps for the consumer, a looming anxiety that in using one of these mechanisms, the user will forever be glued to it. In some cases, the texts literalize this to the extreme: screens as tombs for the living dead. As with the previous chapter, the dead return to the screen, but I turn to examine instances in which the screen reverts to being a window rather than a doorway: what happens when the

dead surface, but cannot exit onto our plane? Similar concerns arise, but the space dons a purgatorial outlook. In this chapter, I rely on Baudrillard again to expound upon these notions of simulation, and I add to this the nature of the viewer rather than theater audience. Where the audience in the theater is present in the same space as the performed subject matter, TV viewership and Internet usage place the screen as a mediating line between user and content. In particular, though Baudrillard's theories are applicable in Parks' play above and the texts in this chapter alike, these latter works demonstrate a further absence: image without body. If the Foundling Father's return is characterized by the embodiment of a weightless image, the return in *Aqua Teen* is framed in terms of an image that can never leave the screen, a "body" composed of pixels. Though the Bradbury text does not explicitly show a television, but only the light by proxy, the absence of the viewers is shaded in similar terms of Baudrillard's discussions of simulation and holograms in that when one interacts with an image, one becomes an image as well. Further, I use Jonathan Crary's *24/7* as a basis for understanding viewership as a recent problem in American culture, one that begs the question of bodily positioning in front of a sedating mechanism. Accordingly, the screen has cultural ramifications, namely in lulling the viewer into accepting the image as a granted to the point that viewership is equated to corpselike stasis.

Although these two texts are not necessarily accepted within the literary canon, they present similar inquiries into the nature of the screen and, as such, represent cultural artifacts that prove necessary to examine: why are we seeing anxieties in both literary and popular works, even crossing into other media? In these cases, the medium of the screen is treated as a haunted space in which ghosts can arise. In more literal depictions, I examine these texts in relation to N. Katherine Hayles' "flickering signifiers" and Lisa Nakamura's scholarship on digital waste and

monuments. In both cases, the representation of body in digital spaces is called into question: does a picture online truly call into being the living or the deceased? Due to its fragile nature, coding is susceptible to rendering the representation of the body erroneously. Because of this, digital memory and embodiment are fickle at best. In short, the representations of death work both ways: they attempt to embody the dead, but they also modify the living as passively related to the image, deteriorating in the space in front of the screen. As memory extends into the web, into coding, remembrance deteriorates rapidly, and the viewer has a tendency to fall prey to the captivation of this hellish space.

Continuing the conversation of death in digital spaces, I focus on a more current examination of the screen and its immersive qualities in Thomas Pynchon's most recent work, *Bleeding Edge* (2013). In this novel, Pynchon explores the exclusive and often mythologized realm of the Deep Web. This particular portion of the Internet, inaccessible without specific software, is subject to a number of urban legends as it is difficult to enter and, thus, to verify. Discussions online emphasize spectacular stories that may or may not be true. In any case, Pynchon's unique take on the Deep Web comes in the form of a digital space called DeepArcher. In this space, protagonist Maxine Tarnow encounters the dead surfacing once more as avatars, muddling the connection between code and body. We generally consider profiles, images, and avatars as extensions of the human body, but can these artifacts exist and continue to function without or in place of the body? However, the novel complicates this notion. In this chapter, I examine these bizarre moments of death on the screen through the lens of Jacques Derrida's *differance*, a neologism meant to express the impossible space that lies between presence and absence. Because of its elusive nature, DeepArcher is constantly in flux: a space that is never the same when Maxine returns, a space that is never present nor absent. With N. Katherine Hayles as

a theoretical guide again, I determine that, because of the fragility of coding as a hierarchy of language that is much more complicated than that of speech and writing, everything on the screen stands in a non-space between the ontological poles of presence and its opposite. As Hayles responds directly to Derrida, I use her theories to expand the issue of ontology presented by the latter into the digital sphere. Increasing the distance between the body and the viewer/user, the trend established in the previous texts continues in Pynchon's text. Within the Deep Web and DeepArcher's realm, connections between body and text or image become much more tenuous. As demonstrated in the nature of avatars and chatbots, digital communication is no longer completely reliant on a body behind a screen. Ultimately, the problem of embodiment moves from the image being physical as in the earlier texts and the body becoming absent in the later ones.

Finally, in a brief coda, I examine the ramifications of turning the screen off. With this section, I propose possible material for future discussion and reflection. If, as I have posited in each of the previous chapters, the screen has severe ramifications for the positioning of the viewer in relation to the image, what happens when that image disappears? If turning on the screen influences the perception of reality and maps its coordinates in new ways, the same must happen in inverse. When the TV is off, the viewer must shift the gaze from the screen to the unmediated world. Using a mixture of popular culture and literary texts as a theoretical lens, I posit that the black screen comes as an ontological shift, one that nevertheless connects image and reality. What appears in reflection in the black screen is, like the televised image, mediated, problematizing yet again the line that is meant to divide lived experience from television broadcast. As a conclusion, I suggest mental reflection and interrogation of the images that saturate our culture, not a full rejection of them. As digital devices are ubiquitous and bound to

stay, it is worth understanding our relationship to the image and how it positions us as viewers and determines our bodily coordinates as such.

Ultimately, the problem of the screen is that it makes it difficult to discern what, if anything, is lived experience anymore. Is reality always already under scrutiny, or must we come up with a new set of evaluative criteria to determine what reality is? What is at stake here is precisely how TV and other screens are molding society actively and generating increasingly passive viewers. After all, David Foster Wallace writes, “pop-cultural references have become such potent metaphors in U.S. fiction not only because of how united Americans are in our exposure to mass images but also because of our guilty indulgent psychology with respect to that exposure” (166). Culture itself is relegated to the metaphors generated out of the technologies we use: again, we text, we google, we facebook. The intrusion of technological apparatuses into our modes of conversation hints at their prominence in the social sphere. Certainly, this can be innocuous enough, but it does reveal a certain trend in relation to new media: as technology changes, so does our language and, thus, our cultural relations to one another. One may make the distinction of a sort of “class” between literary/high references and pop/low references (pardoning the somewhat arbitrary distinction to begin with), but either way, our metaphors are mediated through another’s narrative. Perhaps it’s less likely that one will reference Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* than it is for someone to quote Seth McFarlane’s *Family Guy*, but in both cases, such a reference externalizes an internal sentiment. By this, I mean to say that rather than expressing oneself in one’s own terms, one’s language is borrowed. Albeit language itself is mediation, these references add a further remove.

Within a culture that is so dominated by images and screens, it becomes important to examine how and why viewers are affected. As Wallace notes, literature is such a space of reflection. Importantly, he argues:

> My two big premises are that, on the one hand, a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction, written mostly by young Americans, has largely arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television; and that, on the other hand, televisual culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault. TV, in other words, has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism TV requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day. (171)

On the one hand, literature is a space of social awareness and (hopeful) change. Consider the Victorian "social problem novel" that attempted to point at the poor working conditions for the express purpose of swaying public opinion. Though literature in this case does not directly change the social sphere by instituting laws, changing policies directly, &c., it can (and often does) incite awareness and outrage at deplorable conditions. But what if the very object of critique is able to nullify almost any criticism leveled at it? Wallace's concern is that television is a mutable medium, responding to any such criticism by cancelling it out. This is the risk an author takes in critiquing television: being heard, but only in a vacuum. Television is a neutralizing medium according to Wallace, and any attempt to speak out against it may be lost in the white noise, so to speak. But this doesn't stop writers from generating material to investigate the limits of the screen as well as directly responding to certain negativities within it. On the one

hand, it may be overly optimistic to assume a Pynchon novel, esoteric as it is, is going to overthrow digital reality altogether. On the other, it may be overly cynical to assume that these literary works have no impact whatsoever. Note especially the scope of this project: from the 1950s on, drama and literature are explicitly criticizing the medium of the screen in its various iterations as a dangerous power. At the same time, screens have become increasingly ubiquitous in home and out in public. Because this appears to be the case in a culture that is rapidly relegating its activities to networking, to viewership, to the screen, I intend to examine the following: the position of the viewer in relation to the permeable screen, the effects the screen may have on the viewer's agency, the changes in the coordinates of reality as the image seeps into it (and *vice versa*), and the ways in which mediated reality is complicating how we perceive presence and absence – specifically through the depictions within literature (and partially television itself). Again, I aim not to vilify the screen; I simply intend to investigate its ubiquitous nature and the possible detriments that are paired with (and often overlooked because of) the numerous benefits that come with the usage of these screen-based media.

Chapter One

The Living Screen:

The Screen as a Method of Performance

"I react that way, through my body."
~Susan in Jean-Claude van Itallie's *TV*[15]

Although television lends itself to a very passive audience, one that sits and stares, the act of viewership is very viscerally seated. Quite literally. The body is planted in front of a screen, weight immobile as a boulder on the plains. Regardless of the lack of movement as well as the overall unresponsiveness to given stimuli other than the televised image, the position of the body is in direct relation to the screen. Jean-Claude van Itallie, famous for his Off-Off-Broadway plays and performances, focuses very much on this relation when he discusses television, which he sees as having quite a negative effect on the body. His time working with director Joseph Chaikin at The Open Theater in New York is characterized by extensive experimentation in dramatic form and expressionistic acting. Plays like *The Serpent* and *America Hurrah* performed during the late 60s and early 70s emphasize a collective nature in performance, displacing the actor as a singular character, as well as express a discontent with the then-current state of American culture.[16] Though television is not the most prominent aspect of his oeuvre, it is certainly important for how he conceives of American culture and its relation to mass media. Because of the notable depictions of television when van Itallie discusses the screen, this chapter will focus on two of his plays: *TV* (1966) and *Eat Cake* (1971). The former depicts a trio (Hal, George, and Susan) in a viewing room as their mundane conversation is increasingly overrun by the images on the TV (portrayed by actors in the background). The script of the play is split into

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[15] van Itallie, *TV* 105.
[16] For a much more detailed biography of Jean-Claude van Itallie, see the introduction to Gene A. Plunka's *Jean-Claude van Itallie and the Off-Broadway Theater*.

two columns in print to run simultaneous dialogue between the "People On Television" and the viewing room workers. Ultimately, the trio become immersed in the screen image, so much so that their dialogue mimics the structure of a television sitcom. The latter play concerns itself with a woman preoccupied with her physical appearance encountering an intruder who proceeds to force her to eat cake until she has gained an inordinate amount of weight. This intruder, though, is a man presumably from the television screen in the other room, linking this violent consumption with the advertisements that are heard at the beginning and end of the play.

To begin a discussion of these plays and the importance of their social reflection on these modes of consumption, examining the context demonstrates van Itallie's cultural impact. In terms of success, *America Hurrah* is one of Jean-Claude van Itallie's stronger pieces. For the most part, the trilogy composed of *Interview*, *TV*, and *Motel* was met with positive reviews: Gene A. Plunka notes a plurality of "favorable notices from theater reviewers in *Christian Century*, *Commentary*, *Hudson Review, Manhattan East*, *Massachusetts Review*, *New Republic*, *New York Post*, *Time*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Women's Wear Daily*, and *World Journal Tribune*" (*Jean-Claude* 88). Receiving a few awards and French and German translations, the performance was a grand success for van Itallie and the Pocket Theater performers (89). Perhaps one of the greater recognitions of the merits of this particular collection of plays was the London performance in 1967, a moderate international breakthrough for which the Royal Court Theatre became a temporary club as a means to circumvent the censorship laws that initially banned the play (90). Clearly, van Itallie's work had at least a modicum of cultural currency in the late 60s, becoming something of an international success. However, the popularity of this trilogy is mostly due to favorable opinions of *Motel*. Plunka notes that "[m]ost of the critics agreed that *Motel* was the strongest play, but they were divided about the strengths of the other two" (88). The mixture of

reviews, again, suggests a favoring of *Motel* over the others. Its scathing critique and bizarre stylings, perhaps, struck a chord that the other two plays did not. Nevertheless, the importance of *TV* cannot be overlooked due to lack of the reviews; it is a contextual representation of American culture increasingly steeped in the televised image.

Eat Cake, on the other hand, receives even less critical attention overall. Very little has been written on it other than contextualization and summary, Plunka's work perhaps the most extensive available. The length of the play compared to the other has possibly left it overlooked, but its significance cannot be downplayed simply due to a dearth of scholarship surrounding it. Director, playwright, and friend of van Itallie, Michael Townsend Smith adds some discussion concerning the play: "He [i.e. van Itallie] gave me 'Eat Cake,' a macabre, punchy little play about a woman being raped by materialism: the 'rapist' forces her to eat enormous quantities of cake" (Smith). He offers some commentary (which will appear below at length), but even that is comparably minimal for the discussion surrounding the plays of van Itallie, which is already somewhat small compared to other more mainstream works of theater. Similarly, Nan Robertson of *The New York Times* calls the play "An Eating Orgy" in a 1986 review, producing after that a summary of the text and a brief discussion of Lori Herbison's directing of the play (Robertson). Both reviews suggest an overt physicality to the nature of the play, emphasizing the extremes of consumption depicted. Albeit this text did not receive the consideration or critical attention given to *TV*, the content lends itself to a noteworthy discussion of the prominence of media in American culture as a physical (rather than simply psychical) effect on the body.

Because of the content and its harsh look at American televised culture, these plays should not be treated lightly, but rather should be investigated for how they respond to a given context in American history. Though they are relatively close in years of initial performance (*TV*

in 1966 and *Eat Cake* in 1971), a major shift in perception regarding the placement of the screen in culture occurs, demonstrating a change in van Itallie's sentiments regarding television. Initially, van Itallie seems to see TV as having a fictionalizing effect: TV makes the real world a fiction to be played, an image rather than a body with substance. However, his later reflection in *Eat Cake* demonstrates an inversion of the "reality as image" trope. Instead, the image *becomes* reality, becomes heavily and powerfully physical. What is demonstrated by these texts is a transition from viewing the TV as decorporalizing our social reality to viewing TV as being overly corporal. Instead of a sense of weightless reality, the image becomes overly real, so much so that it violates the body in horrific ways, marking the body as physical victim of an image. I intend, then, to examine these plays more closely in a theoretical manner to demonstrate the cultural shift van Itallie suggests, from a world that is becoming simulation to a world that is physically manipulated and directed by an aggressively active image with the body at stake.

The Absent Screen

Strangely, in both plays, the screen is precariously absent. Though a TV is clearly present in both, the screen itself is never seen. There is an underlying irony in the lack of a screen, especially in a play titled *TV*. In the case of *Eat Cake*, the TV is placed in another room, heard but not seen. In the absence of the screen, an actor takes the place of the barrier through various gestures and methods onstage, only intentionally to rupture the internal fourth wall within the play. Through performance, the boundary is established, and through performance again it is destroyed. However, van Itallie seems to try to compensate for the absence, at least in *TV*. Thus, I will begin with this play before moving later to *Eat Cake*. In the script for the play, the text itself is dichotomized into two columns throughout. Gene A. Plunka explains, "In early 1965,

van Itallie was working on a play that would be used as an exercise for Open Theater members grappling with the idea of speaking simultaneously. During this exercise that Chaikin developed, the actors had to sense when to stop speaking and when to start without a prearranged signal" (*Jean-Claude* 85). The initial response was *Pavane* (later retitled *Interview*), whose title was meant "to reflect the rhythmic structure of the play" (85). Out of this experimentation resulted *TV*. The structure of this play differs from the other two scripts in the trilogy. Where *Interview* and *Motel*, though both structurally complex, are singular in columns of text, *TV* is printed uniquely: "*To indicate the correlation of the events and dialogue on television with those which occur in the viewing room, the play is printed in two columns*" (van Itallie, *TV* 72). The structure of this play suggests a double vision of viewing TV: what is off TV is equally subject to being watched as that which is on TV. Though occupying mostly different spaces (at least until the conclusion), they occur in the same temporal realm. Nevertheless, the two columns suggest a viewer/viewed model. On the left is the viewing room, and on the right is the image on the (absent) screen. To clarify, the three viewing room workers' speech is always printed on the left of the page, and the TV personalities' are always on the right. If there is a screen here, if there is a symbolic demarcation between the TV characters and the "real" ones, that space must be in the text itself. Never is there a true demarcation onstage as the screen is always absent, and the players move further and further forward as the play progresses. No limit or boundary is ever established other than in textual form. The separation of the two columns implies, then, that the boundary that is established by the text is arbitrary, especially if it is indeterminate when performed onstage.

Towards the end of the play, we see the "real" characters appearing on the right side in stage directions. For example, the inclusion of stage directions like the moment when Mother

"*put[s] her arm around George's shoulders*" (161) suggests a crossing over. Literally, George's body appears in the right column. Still, his speech *always* appears left. By the final two pages, stage directions span the middle of the page, breaking into both columns in print. The columns remain structurally sound (i.e. they are still on the page, left and right), but the content moves back and forth. Again, we see images like the Mother touching George physically. What this demonstrates is that, to some extent, the divisions and binaries established and generally socially agreed upon are, in fact, illusory. The particular binary of offscreen and onscreen here is permutable, fluctuating. Where David Foster Wallace notes the prominence of pop culture metaphors in American culture at large above, van Itallie amplifies the idea to completely mediated experience: reality takes on the behavior of the televised. However, whether or not intentional on the part of van Itallie or Sharon Thie (credited as the script designer), the attempt seems to be that of still keeping the "real" characters in their separate space on the left, even when the televised media takes over. Though I do note that the touch is "physical" above, the implication van Itallie posits in this play is the derealization of reality itself: we are becoming the image rather than the other way around. The image may infiltrate the real world, but almost virally in the sense that the image becomes the new social real.

With the removal of the internal fourth wall of *TV*, the characters on the screen move forward on the stage, taking over the dialogue between Hal, Susan, and George. Gene A. Plunka references and paraphrases Gautam Dasgupta's theory that "the rectangular set is similar to a television box frame, uniting the vapid world of the television performers with the insipid lives of the observers" (*Jean-Claude* 102). The argument here is predicated on the shape of this staging (a rectangle) being in some way analogous to a TV console. There is some definite correlation between the two: a viewer sits and watches the images on the screen or stage for a

duration of time, each program has a limited time but may "re-run," &c. The very nature of theater and television both circulate around viewership. Certainly, though, there is some difference between the two: both may be performed, but the image on the TV screen is always already mediated through the technology. Live bodies appear only at a distance. The only ones who see the "live" performance of television are those who are involved in the recording or otherwise audience to the action directly.

A play, on the other hand, involves physical bodies in the same space as the audience (unless a playwright or director decides otherwise for artistic purposes). Generally, though, a play will be performed with living bodies. The conclusion Plunka draws from Dasgupta's statement above is that "art and reality become fused as one" (102). As I have mentioned earlier, this is a fairly common discussion of *TV* and is a prominent subject of scholarship. As Kerstin Schmidt notes in *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama*, "It is, above all, the screen, nearly ubiquitous in contemporary society, that extends space, projects simulated realities, and destroys the illusion of a closed representable reality" (127). In part, Schmidt's words bear a likeness to Plunka's, further suggesting that this is a common thread of scholarly criticism about van Itallie's plays. She adds a brief mention that the TV is a ubiquitous object, a cultural artifact that, because of its dominant placement in global culture, sharply molds social reality. The discussion is taken further by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, especially in works such as *Simulacra and Simulation*. I note these here only to suggest again that this is a prominent discussion that has been well covered, even in relation to Jean-Claude van Itallie's plays. Instead of opening this discussion to the lack of distinction between these images and the social real, I intend to focus on the theory posited by Dasgupta and to take it a step further by suggesting that if one reads the stage as a screen, two things happen: the screen boundary

becomes a performative membrane, and, due to this arbitrary performance, the images on the stage become a part of lived experience.

Similar to this, Plunka suggests that "[t]he Woman [in *Eat Cake*] epitomizes the commercialized product of television and advertising industries to the extent that she can only associate the intruder with show business personalities such as a game show host or a doctor in a soap opera" (*Jean-Claude* 148). Where the image becomes the real (or *vice versa* more accurately) in *TV*, the image determines the real in *Eat Cake*. Instead of deconstructing the binary of life and fiction in the first play, van Itallie's emphasis primarily shifts to the physical in the latter. If Hal, George, and Susan *become* a literal sitcom by the end of *TV*, the Woman only chooses to emulate this in *Eat Cake*. Her life becomes a personal performance as she mediates her understanding of the world through the medium that she consumes and which, in turn, consumes her. In this sense, the play becomes increasingly deterministic. The Woman cannot escape the clutches of advertising, her body conforming to its influences.

Though they differ in their approach, both plays operate on an underlying principle that unifies them, namely in how people relate to the image. Plunka notes of *Eat Cake* that "[t]he media, in its latent attempt to produce 'perfect people' who will buy certain commodities, turns individuals into automatons" (149). The actions of Hal, George, and Susan are to some extent replicated in the Woman: each of these figures ultimately operates under the same social code of viewership. In this model, one watches TV and, in doing so, replicates it. However, the implications are not identical. Though both sets of characters experience the image in a raw form, the Woman's emulation seems purely performative on her part, affected rather than deterministically imposed at this point. Further, van Itallie's emphasis is less on the image (i.e. *TV*) than on the act of consumption (i.e. *Eat Cake*) as having a bodily impact. In both cases, the

body suffers, but *TV* emphasizes loss of weight where *Eat Cake* focuses on gain. In this way, the body is victim to the screen, although in inverse manner in comparison.

Substituting Body for Screen

Because the performance serves as a stand-in for the screen, the position of the body is called into question: if the screen is missing from these plays, there is nevertheless a suggested surrogate. In both of van Itallie's plays, the nature of television becomes increasingly visceral, focusing on the body as a site of viewership and performance. Because the screen is not onstage in either play, it must be represented through other means. Writing on the collection *America Hurrah* towards the end of her chapter on *Motel* in particular, Kerstin Schmidt argues, "the mediatization of culture produces the somewhat paradoxical situation of both an expansion and an implosion of space. Media technology overcomes physical limitations, which makes for the expansion of theatrical space. But also, it becomes increasingly impossible to locate the body in these new, virtual spaces" (127-128). Discussing the collective nature of the three plays that make up the trilogy, Schmidt posits not simply the common argument that the image and the real blur, but rather that media create an impossible space that makes the body an anomalous singularity. The positioning of the acting body in terms of the play becomes rather ambiguous for van Itallie. First, the demarcation discussed in the previous section is absent: where is the line between the People on Television and the viewing room workers? The positioning of anything and anyone is contingent on the performance and direction of the play. If the reality of the viewing room is dominated by the televised image gradually, the demarcation must necessarily shift through time. The line, then, is constantly in flux.

Further, the actor as the site of a singular body is thrown into question with the fluctuation of characters performed. Certainly Jean-Claude van Itallie is not alone in terms of allowing actors to don multiple roles in this context. For example, Megan Terry's *Viet Rock* (1966) employs a similar technique and fluidity of moving between characters onstage that decentralizes the actor. As another example, Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers* (1965) features characters who are composites rather than singular: "SHE who is CLARA PASSMORE who is the VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL" (29). This character is a combination of identities, religious iconography, and even species. She is a simultaneous figure, taking on each of these titles at various stages of the play. Even so, this balancing act of identities is not unheard of in more mainstream media. Consider the ubiquity of characters who take on multiple roles in other plays, TV shows, and films. Generally, though, the number seems comparatively minimal. Regardless of whether or not this technique is employed in the mainstream, Jean-Claude van Itallie amplifies the nature of the multiple-character actor. The first character introduced other than the three main figures is "*Ronnie Gilbert as* HELEN FARGIS, the President's wife, a UGP researcher, a member of the rock and roll group, a peace marcher, Lily Heaven, the headache sufferer, a singer in the evangelist choir, and Mother in 'My Favorite Teenager;'" four characters follow in similar suit (*TV* 70). All counted, forty-nine characters are split between five actors. This requires a certain level of juggling identities, decentering the concept of a singular self. Each of these character changes is directly related to representing the absent screen: where a channel change cannot be represented by an apparatus, a screen, some sort of stage mechanism, &c., the actors must take it upon themselves to act out the changing television landscape. They are, for all intents and purposes, the screen because they perform its operations.

For van Itallie, this may suggest one negative consequence of television, namely the displacement of identity. We do see the same effect in Terry and Kennedy, but the decentralization of the characters' persona(e) in *TV* emphasizes the saturation of the media, even in the late 60s. The number of characters that the actors must undertake in performance is rather overwhelming (though not impossible). Each role requires adopting (perhaps even *adapting to*) a new identity. Even if the characters are performed with superficial characteristics or stereotypical behavior as suggested by some of the more sitcom-like figures, the balancing of these identities requires a mental shift as well as a physical one: to behave as "the President's wife" (70) and then later as "a singer in the evangelist choir" (70) would require Ronnie Gilbert to adopt certain stances, vocal modulations, emotional affects, &c., and these are only two of the figures Gilbert must play. In terms of this performance, the shifts also parallel what it is to watch television: the viewer encounters many "people" who figuratively inhabit a space (and time) in one's living room. The simulation of watching TV is captured by the shifts in character onstage, but also in the sheer enormity of the number of personalities one encounters when watching. Short of being the voices in one's head, these characters are portrayed as detriments to the American psyche throughout the play, especially towards the end when the viewing room trio are subsumed into the television programming. Clearly, such an absorption into the image is metaphorical, but the psychical implications of the decentered character/actor mirror van Itallie's skepticism of the ubiquity of television: if the characters on TV can change with every channel, if one can see an actor on one show and then on another as a completely different person, the viewer's concept of identity must come under question as well.

Van Itallie addresses this problem towards the end of the play with the aforementioned dissolution of the line that separates the People on Television from the viewing room trio. At

first, Hal, Susan, and George are perhaps the most centralized characters we see in *TV*. However, the self is increasingly lost. Ultimately, "*Hal and Susan and George are slowing down because they are mesmerized by 'My Favorite Teenager*'" (159), a typical sitcom that breaches the lines between the screen and the real. By the end of the play, they "*are completely mesmerized by the TV show*": "*Now they all speak like situation-comedy characters*" as they collectively participate in the show's comedy and "*join in the canned laughter*" (161, 162, 163). Perhaps the suggestion here is more indicative of a problem of attention: "mesmerized" does not imply physicality of the image so much as the gravity of and fixation on it. Bert O. States discusses theater itself in a very similar manner, suggesting that "[i]n the straightforward emotional sense Hamlet has been irretrievably lost with his death on stage. His story was indeed a fiction, but one that has amazed the very faculty of eyes and ears. The thing we call catharsis arises, in part at least, from the fact that we can be carried so utterly into this dream by the actor only to have it come to nothing, to be purged as the lights dim" (202). States' discussion of Shakespearean drama is also a blanket idea for theater as a whole, namely that the audience watches something that happens but doesn't. Hamlet dies, but doesn't; Olivier still lives at the end of the play to take a bow.

Oddly, though, is this not also the crux of watching television? This fixation that States examines is predicated on the same viewership described immediately above by van Itallie. The viewing room trio cannot escape "*the canned laughter*" because of this draw: what we see on TV is, for all intents and purposes, parallel to States' theory. This idea of viewership is amplified, though, in *TV* in that the viewer is not simply watching the fiction unfold, but becoming immersed more than the audience of theater, more involved than a TV viewer at home. George, Hal, and Susan are caught up in the image, not just in the gravitational pull States suggests, but actually *in* the line of viewership. By this I mean to say that they have entered into the field of

vision, have become the viewed. To elaborate using States' example, it is as if the audience in the theater have become not just spectators but actors or agents in the fictional world of *Hamlet*, interacting with Hamlet himself rather than Olivier as the actor. There is, then, a suggested instability in identity for the viewers: if the viewing room trio can be swept up and become part of the very medium they are supposed to be watching, van Itallie seems to be suggesting that the very nature of television is the shifting of culturally accepted models of viewer/viewed in a way that removes the barrier between.

To take this a step further, one might compare the function of *TV* to that of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre. In his essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," Brecht lists multiple tenets of Epic Theatre, including the following: it "turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action," "forces him to take [sic] decisions," "he is made to face something," &c. (37). These itemized descriptions (among others) suggest that Epic Theatre is a method of social action rather than just pure entertainment, that theater *does* something. Each performance turns the audience member into an agent rather than simply a viewer. Instead of going to see a play for the purpose of a night out, the audience *confronts* theater (and *vice versa*). Although much of what Brecht envisions of theater hinges on alienation as a method to achieve these aspects, van Itallie's plays employ similar effects without alienating the audience from the illusion of theater. By this, I am not suggesting that van Itallie's plays perfectly fit the Epic Theatre modes, but that they share traits that illuminate the purpose of *TV* as a social commentary that attempts to effect social response. Even if van Itallie's conception of theater is not identical to Brecht's, the similarities are notable enough to demonstrate that the two playwrights have similar ends in mind with the purpose of theater as more than an entertainment medium. To the end of social rearrangement and investigation, van Itallie's play suggests a

reordering of the relation between audience (viewer) and subject (viewed, in the play or on television). Where Brecht employs alienation as a method to estrange the audience from suspension of disbelief, van Itallie uses familiarity *ad nauseam* to upset the comfortable ruse of theatrical illusion: what happens when the televised image becomes *too* familiar? We generally view television as a commonplace medium, especially in our context. Even in the late 60s, the medium was fairly widespread in the US. Van Itallie pushes this familiarity further in the form of true immersion. With the dissolution of the line that separates the viewing room crew from the image, the viewer and viewed are no longer separated and are, thus, equally defined with (rather than against) each other. Again, though, van Itallie and Brecht are not identical in their methodology. Where Brecht suggests theater as a space to undo the illusion, van Itallie employs this very illusion by turning it against itself. Even when he breaks the fourth wall within the stage of *TV*, the possibility of stepping offstage into the real is only implicit rather than stated onstage (i.e. as I've said before, the act of people coming out of the TV and into the room with Susan, Hal, and George implies that any fictional/nonfictional binary can dissolve, but the players never actually address the audience directly to demonstrate such a rupture of the play/reality binary). To some extent, then, the fiction is meant to be understood *as* fiction, as I have discussed earlier.

Nevertheless, in a way, this familiarity is a method of distancing, getting too close to the object itself as to make it strange. Like magnifying an image, the thing itself is exposed as something else: an image under such intense scrutiny becomes pixelated and, thus, unfamiliar. In this way, the closer the televised image moves to the viewer, the more distant it becomes due to the way it forces the viewer to perceive reality from an altered perspective. Although the viewing room workers lose their *capacity for action*, the audience is *made to face something*. In the play is the discomfort of seeing the seemingly innocuous medium of television made into a hypnotic

and absorbing force from which the viewer cannot escape. If nothing else, the psychic dilemma presented onstage has the potential to turn the audience into mindful participants rather than passive viewers.[17] If the image on the console can absorb Susan, Hal, and George, the next step can be taken to absorb the audience as well *unless* the audience becomes aware of this. Television, normally a medium that pacifies and lulls the viewer into susceptibility, loses its power if the audience is made aware of this ability. Van Itallie's unnerving images, then, have the potential to upset the viewer's complacence and to force the viewer to confront the image directly. Again, the overly familiar images come too close for comfort, demonstrating the risk the viewer runs when watching television: viewership means to become the passively viewed. What is at stake here, then, is the positioning of audience in relation to image.

In terms of this passivity, it may be important to note that some TV shows of the time aim explicitly to counteract the sedentary lifestyle associated with television. For example, the early 60s *The Debbie Drake Show* features the eponymous star instructing viewers on how to stay fit *while* watching television. With television, there is the possibility of becoming slovenly and out of shape. Shows like Debbie Drake's propose a solution to the viewer's passivity: exercising in the comfort of one's own home. Still, the convenience extends further than this. The nature of this exercise regimen allows the viewer to continue watching TV after a moderate work out. Digitally archived excerpts of the program show the woman in her own living room

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[17] To demonstrate the ability of theater to unsettle and provoke as a method to generate active members of theater rather than simply viewers, I would like briefly to mention a scene from *Mad Men* (2007-2015) in which van Itallie's play *Interview* is performed. In this sequence, Don Draper (Jon Hamm) sits visibly perturbed by the play and its anti-advertising stance. At home with his wife Megan (Jessica Paré), Don Draper sarcastically states, "The mighty theater punches its audience in the face with its subtle message," and proceeds to defend his own position in advertising (rpgmakr). Albeit this is a fictional performance (and, coincidentally enough, one that is televised), the reaction does suggest what van Itallie's plays serve to do. The material becomes, again, too familiar as to be unsettling. Don's anger is not in the play itself or how it was performed so much as the way it strikes at his own social position. As a result of his anger, one of the purposes of Epic Theatre has been achieved: the audience member is socially active outside of passive viewership. The dialogue between husband and wife, though tense, suggests that the play has an effect beyond the theater itself, enough so to upset the stability of this family dynamic.

(or, rather, a set made to look like a living room) as she instructs viewers on how to perform exercises that will presumably tone the body (tvdays). Obviously, the suggestion is domestic ease and comfort, a familiar setting in which one can relax yet also stay in shape. One notable aspect of this living room, though, is a television set up in the corner. Another screen within a screen. In this case, it is not on, a delightful irony: the viewer's screen is on, but Drake's is off (tvdays). Certainly this is a matter of pragmatic thinking as it may ultimately distract the viewer to have the TV on TV (i.e. the one in Drake's living room) functioning when the focus is supposed to be on Drake herself. However, doesn't that concern also pose the problem for the console on which *The Debbie Drake Show* is playing? There is something captivating about an illuminated screen that may distract from the content as such. Consider that one watching a show could easily sit and see Drake without exercising. As I write these words with a clip of *The Debbie Drake Show* open in my browser, I myself am sitting rather than doing crunches, lunges, &c. The image on TV is, then, an ideal to attain rather than necessarily a reality. It serves as a suggestion rather than as a necessary part of life. And what of the shows that come on after? Does the viewer leave the screen or continue watching? Although shows like this aim to prevent viewers from being complacent with sitting and staring, they are nevertheless caught up in the televised gaze: the purpose of the show is also to draw in more viewers. Television is still about watching, even if the body is active. The viewer is inherently glued to the screen: to move, in this case, still requires a certain codependence on the screen as it does with *The Debbie Drake Show*.

In conjunction with this proposition that viewership is symbiotic rather than clearly separated by the screen as a definitive line, Kerstin Schmidt's argument above certainly holds true as the identities of the people onstage are constantly decentered by the multiple roles they play: again, according to the stage directions, "*As television characters, they have only a few*

facial masks, such as 'cute,' 'charming,' or 'serious,' which they use infallibly, like signals in the course of each television segment" (van Itallie, *TV* 77-78). As Jean-Claude van Itallie notes, the actors play multiple characters rather that a single one and must adapt to a variety of character types and facial expressions. The description is even somewhat reductive as the characters are summed up in adjectives rather than fleshed out. Certainly there is a parallel to stock characters on television and the general flatness therein. Further, if identity is in flux, this space relies heavily on embodiment to establish a boundary only to rupture it. Individuality is null in this play as characters become increasingly homogenous. Still, the body is at the center of the screen image and, thus, takes the place of the screen where it is missing. For van Itallie, the screen must be acted out and represented in and through the body rather than actually onstage as a prop. He generates a body image that is indistinguishable (if not inseparable) from the television screen on which the bodies are supposed to appear, and the body itself is a screen: "All of the People On Television are dressed in shades of gray. They make no costume changes and use no real props. Their faces are made up with thin horizontal black lines to suggest the way they might appear to a viewer. They are playing television images" (77). The lines on their faces serve as physical embodiments of the screen without the apparatus present. What we are seeing, then, is the physical displacement of the screen. In this way, the screen becomes a performance itself, a boundary that is accepted only in so much as it abides by a set of rules established by the play. The audience does not see a physical glass, no box or console that would indicate the TV in any way. Any attempt to justify a separation of the screen from the body or the screen from the real becomes difficult, if not completely arbitrary. The boundaries established at the beginning of these plays begin to crumble when they are demonstrably performative.

Further, the body is the site of this performance in a way that suggests that the TV screen is only a performative membrane that can be established without a screen present. In a scene of the play in which the People On Television depict a news scenario, a man-on-the-street is silenced when he utters vulgarity: "*It is as if the sound were cut off on the word he was going to say, but we can read 'Fuck' on his lips*" (116). The stage directions depict something that is common even today, almost fifty years after the play, namely that cursing will generally be removed. What we see here is a body that censors itself through performance in two ways. The first is rather obvious: the actor is not actually onscreen *per* van Itallie's staging of this play, so he must pretend that his voice has been censored. Further, this "ONE YOUNG MAN FROM NEW YORK CITY" states that "The Washington Monument's going to burst into bloom and – [fuck]" (116), where the bracketed expletive would have completed the otherwise broken quotation. It is a common facet of television for the word *fuck* to be censored, but there is no true censor working within this play. The actor articulates the word only by the shape of his mouth. In this way, he embodies the absent screen and the FCC regulations that dictate what can and cannot be said. Writing on *Othello*, yet equally applicable here, Bert. O States notes that "[e]verything he [i.e. the actor] does is at once an imitation of an action and an action in itself; it is both artificial and natural, both calculated and effortless" (137). The suggestion here applies equally to this censored actor: within the fiction of the text, he is being censored by the standards set by the US government; outside of the fiction, the actor is the seat of censorship. It is only by performing censorship through the body that the word *fuck* is muted within the context of the scene. Within the world of fiction, the censorship is real; within the world we inhabit, the censorship is the act itself on the part of the actor. The implication, then, is that the action can and will occur, with or without the screen. It is, as States would argue, the performance and the

act of censoring the word wrapped up in each other. Normally, we think of the censorship as something offscreen, someone pressing a button to prevent a word from being broadcast. However, van Itallie situates the actor here in such a way that suggests that the boundary of the screen is arbitrary and only agreed upon. That is, what happens in this scene is entirely contingent upon the agreed-upon mores and standards set forth by US culture as regards what is "appropriate" for television. Because of the staging, the censored *fuck* is gratuitous, indulging in a nod to TV censorship, and suggesting, perhaps, that our very bodies conform to the laws of television even when one is not present.

If *TV* demonstrates that the body itself becomes the site of the screen when the console is absent, *Eat Cake* does so in a much more violent way. In this play, the Woman is metaphorically raped by televised media, forced to eat food against her will. If this rape takes place onscreen, then the body itself must be a displacement of the screen. Gene Plunka states, "The television is on throughout the play, effectively linking the onstage action with the subliminal message that the media manipulates our basic desires" (*Jean-Claude* 149). This assertion suggests a psychological approach to the action onstage more than a physical one. Though certainly valid in its premise, I would like to introduce the idea that this sequence, though fictional, does not only represent the psychic damage of television media, but also bodily damage, even if indirectly. Van Itallie himself concedes in the stage directions that this encounter "might be a fantasy of hers" before proposing other options that this manifestation might represent (*Eat Cake* 8). The action, though, suggests a physical interaction paired with the psychological influence proposed by Plunka. If consumerism is influenced by the TV image, advertising, &c., then the body must be in direct relation to that image. Commercials suggest products to buy, game shows feature spectacular prizes as objects to be desired, and other TV shows provide examples of use and

consumption through product placement. The image becomes a mode of forming the social real and determining the coordinates in which a given populace lives.

Even so, when we discuss the invasion of the image into the real, rarely is the image so viscerally literalized. For example, in the following chapter, I will discuss Suzan Lori-Parks' *The America Play* and its embodiment of the screen image. However, the image itself presents a dilemma: it is a physical rupture, but it never seems to touch. In this way, it becomes a visual embodiment of a deceased figure, the Foundling Father, who returns after his death to the stage by means of a TV.[18] However, *Eat Cake* suggests a much more physical exploration of image as body: "Behind her we see a young man slip into the house. He is attractive, dressed in burglar black. He stands for a moment looking at the Woman. Indeed he might be a fantasy of hers, or someone who stepped out of the T.V. screen. He might also be an ad-executive indulging neat and attractively in a perverse little hobby. He is very smooth. His voice, when he talks, is the same voice we heard coming from the television set" (*Eat Cake* 8). First is the entrance of a new body onstage. Instead of stepping out of the TV in a literal sense, he enters the room through the door. Unlike the People On Television in *TV*, who are always already an image (i.e. they are always onstage, always have the lines painted on their faces), the Man from the TV must enter the apartment. Though he is inherently linked to the image of the screen and, in van Itallie's stage directions, may have entered the room from the TV as suggested above, he uses the door to exit. The action itself is predicated on a tangible body interacting with and moving through physical space. Although the text only says he "slips in" (8), he leaves through the door rather than through the screen (13). His body operates *per* the rules of the physical rather than the psychical or symbolic. Moreover, again, van Itallie proposes the fantastical representation instead of the body, emphasizing that the Man may simply be an image or in the mind. Though

[18] See Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play* in her collection *The America Play and Other Works*.

presumably intentional in the slight ambiguity here (i.e. are we to take van Itallie at his ambivalent word one way or another concerning who this man is?), the Man is inherently linked both to the image and the production of the image: either he is the image, or he is in advertising. Underlying the lack of the corporeal is a hint of sex appeal in his voice as well as the desire implicit in consumption, regardless of what he may be. The question remains, though: to what extent is this man actually physical?

The Man grounds himself as more than an image through his sexual assertions. The figure makes no qualms about who he is, bluntly stating, "I'm a rapist" (9). Where sexuality is seen as an action censored by the implicit screen in *TV*, the opposite is the case for *Eat Cake*. Van Itallie links the TV figure with the act of rape, yet, oddly, the figure never penetrates the Woman. His actions, though, are heavily invasive. First, he enters uninvited into the domestic sphere in the act of intrusion. His approach is marked immediately with invasion and foul intent. Whether or not he actually has sex with the Woman is not what defines this rape. Instead, it is his underlying hostility and his coercive manner that signifies that the Woman, by the end of the play, has become a victim of rape. Even in the absence of the directly sexual, the dominance of the TV image is a suggestive presence connected to a violent sexuality and insatiable carnal desire. As stated above, Plunka suggests that the TV console is directly connected to the subconscious, constantly bombarding the viewer with messages of consumption (*Jean-Claude* 149). The suggestion here is much more psychological than actual rape, but even so, the act of rape (or at least its suggestion), is unequivocally physical due to the eating onstage forced upon the Woman.

As such, the premise of the play focuses less on the idea of viewership that we see in *TV* than the idea of consumerism: the mysterious figure repeatedly forces the Woman to order food

and eat it. Several times, his line is simply “Eat” (*Eat Cake* 12, 13, &c.). Throughout the play, we see a constant oral fixation on the part of the Man. Certainly, the Man is fascinated in watching this woman, but the constant references to eating, vomiting, weight gain, &c. suggest that the mouth is the focus of this play. The act of consumption is embodied symbolically in the forced eating of the cake. Van Itallie makes no qualms demonstrating that this is a play about the “rape” of advertising and the negativity of TV media by opening and closing the play with advertisements and product placements. Further, the fact that the title itself is a command to action suggests the lack of agency in consumerism: there is no escape from the voice of the TV; there is no choice but to consume.

In this constant eating, there is to some extent the visual component of viewership, but even so, the TV (if the Man is an object of the screen) is the viewer rather than the viewed. At one point, he forces the Woman to undress “down to her panties, but he stops her,” proceeding to request that she don her “most attractive bathrobe” (9). For a self-proclaimed rapist, his concern seems less about literal sexuality than with something displaced. Where van Itallie’s *TV* focuses more on the implications of removing the distinction of the screen as a way to examine the image as indistinguishable from the viewer, this particular figure in *Eat Cake* represents the more bodily substance of said image. If reality is drained of image, there is a general reading of this as also losing the gravity we generally associate with reality. However, *Eat Cake* posits a fascination with weight gain: the image forces reality to take on weight rather than lose it. In relation to this idea, Bert O. States correlates the image to lived experience in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*:

> At bottom, it is not a matter of the illusory, the mimetic, or the representational, but of a certain kind of *actual*, of having something before one’s vision – and in

> the theater one's hearing – to which we join our being. The actor enables us to recognize the human "from the inside": Olivier arouses *that* particular gesture in me; I am watching Olivier *exist* as Macbeth, and through this unique ontological confusion I exist myself in a new dimension. (46-47)

On the one hand, this may sound exaggerated: Olivier never suffers the true pains of the character, but rather acts them out. However, much like we refer to things in a dream as if they happened in a real moment (e.g. "[I dreamed that] *I was in a house*," &c.), the theater can be said to happen. When we see the Woman gain weight on the stage, we witness the rape in an altered sense of reality. Ontologically, *something* is happening. Even if we deny the Man his presence or physicality, we cannot deny that the Woman experiences the effects of overconsumption. Even if the suggestion of hallucination is validated by the playwright himself, the Woman's suffering is nevertheless very much grounded in the body as a site of pain and discomfort. Her eating is undeniable.

In this way, the action of eating becomes distant from its initial social position. We tend to think of eating as an action performed both for personal and social need, more than once daily. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks between: these serve as means for people to seek sustenance, connection with others, and, often, comfort. However, van Itallie subverts the way food is perceived in terms of the social role it occupies. In relation to Epic Theatre, Brecht states, "once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matter and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function" (39). For Brecht, the dissipation of the illusion is carried out through his use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), a means through which the mechanisms of theater become apparent *as*

theater. Even if van Itallie does not employ this method and continues to use the illusion, he turns the illusion against itself again in *Eat Cake* as he does in *TV*. Though he does not alienate like Brecht, the play upsets what one would call the "experience." Again, the act of eating is generally seen as a normal action, one that is performed more than once a day, but van Itallie turns the act into one of violent and unsettling spectacle. The act of the Man imposing eating on the Woman undoes the normal expectations of consumption. The familiarity of the action *contra* what actually happens within the fiction (as with the nonfictional performance of eating onstage, which will be discussed below) creates a schism: that which is normal is subverted, and the audience is forced to (attempt to) reconcile the difference between how eating was perceived previously and how it is portrayed. The play, then, works again along the lines of Epic Theatre in this distancing: taking the familiar and subverting it.

As States argues above, there is an ontological question of what is happening here, what happens onstage. As with Brecht, the theater for van Itallie is not meant to immerse the audience in the comfort of the image, but to deny any such hope. If food is normally something we need and desire, the play renders it unappetizing. Even more so, consider the fact that van Itallie selects desserts, the most decadent and extraneous of foods (in that we do not *need* desserts to live, but desire them as accessory or supplement to our required consumption). Why, then, take the image of cake and make it painful and nauseating? As stated above in relation to *TV*, the audience of *Eat Cake* is "made to face something" (Brecht 37). This confrontation is unpleasant in the way the Woman is forced to consume, is raped by the Man. For both Brecht and van Itallie, the familiar is distorted with this method of distancing to present the audience with an image that is initially close but becomes increasingly unsettling and further away from the object as originally perceived. But, again, to what end? Van Itallie turns the audience's attention from

the pleasantry of food to the misery of the body as a method of investigating the American obsession with consumption, precisely through the medium of television. If cake becomes a vomitous pile of waste, the image that it corresponds to must undergo a similar transformation. As the site of the screen, the American body consumes an image, an image which then tells the viewer to consume further through purchase. The body is, thus, the consumer as well as a method of consumption, susceptible to suggestion through the image to the point of extreme nausea.

Van Itallie further stresses the importance of the body in the action: "The sound of her eating and burping and crying and vomiting is magnified over the loudspeakers as the lights dim. We hear the sound for a while with some of the TV muzak sound distorted also in the background. When the lights come up the man has assumed tall, stick like proportions" (*Eat Cake* 13) In this break from the "realistic" image onstage before the lights dim, we have a spectral figure with exaggerated proportions. This scene, called "the Monster Tableau" (13), heightens the dramatic qualities of this play as an analog for a television scene and suggests the possibility that this is not actually taking place. However, even for something so distorted, the scene is absolutely grounded in processes of incontinence. The Woman cannot fully digest the overload of the food, eating herself sick. Although belches can be produced without real food, the act itself is generally not one that needs to be "acted" so much as made to happen. In a sense, the body itself is *made to happen* as well. On the note of the body, States suggests the following:

> We must pursue further the question of how the channel of the actor's body influences the nature and rigor of the dramatic text that passes through it. There are really two questions here, or at least two perspectives from which we can ask the question: the first pertains to the actor's influence on the composition of the

> dramatic text – in a word, how the dramatist composes, as we say, *for* the actor as the inevitable carrier of his text; the second pertains to what the actor's presence does *to* the text as it passes through him, transcending textuality and becoming a theatrical representation. (128)

Using this lens suggests that the Woman's body is one of two things: a conduit of performance in an almost possessed manner, or that she is the very action or representation itself. In either case, the body is emphasized over the text. From the first perspective, we may ascertain that eating is perhaps a valid metaphor for acting: are not States' words the very description of ingestion as the body consumes the food *that passes through it*? The Woman's subsequent excretions of filth and frosting are at the very crux of this theory. In this way, the text is made to happen, brought forth through the Woman (as actor) to channel van Itallie's words. The actor consumes the words and acts using the body as the language through which the audience ascertains meaning. However, it can also be said that the Woman (as character), as a body, is made to happen. In the action of eating as instructed by the director or the playwright, the nausea and aftermath serve as reminders that the action is real, not metaphorical or simply representational, going beyond States' suggestion: this is no longer about pure performance so much as actual reaction. Only so much of the eating can be simulated before the Woman must take a real bite. The food, along with the words of the play, must then pass through her digestive tract and exit one way or another, surfacing as a reminder that the performance is not simply one of words, but one that expends and writes the body as a locus of pain and punishment for consumption. Even in the absence of food, the burp appears to be produced as a consequence of the consumption for this woman. Speaking in the performative sense, the Woman playing this figure must produce this sound one way or another, and, as it isn't difficult to generate, it is possible that these burps are

real. Hopefully the audience was spared the realism of vomiting, but even so the actions performed or recreated here all situate this as a bodily performance of grotesque proportions.

For Director Michael Townsend Smith, this action is agreeable in one sense: “I like seeing actors eat on stage; it is such a common activity, unmistakeably [sic] real, and connects the audience with the character like nothing else. I had two good actors, Alla Makaroff and Ted Shackelford, and the play was chillingly effective. It left an amazing mess of white and chocolate cake on the stage floor after every performance” (Smith). With real food, the acting ceases to some extent, and the performance delves into the real. Eating is a very physical act that maintains a direct relation between consumption and the body: to eat is literally to gain weight. Although one can act out eating (e.g. give an actor an empty plate and she can pretend to eat cake), Smith sees the staging with real food as something compulsory. But this runs the real risk of weight gain. If Makaroff continued to eat for each performance (contingent upon whether or not there were multiple performances over a duration of time), she would proceed to gain actual weight. Shackelford sees the “amazing mess” and praises it for this realness. But even in the spectacle is horror: if the mess is real, even though a play, the real body is spattered and coated in bakery matter.

Further, the very substance that coats this woman is equated to sexual residue through rather suggestive imagery. Van Itallie places the Man in a dominant position in relation to the Woman’s eating: “Above her, manned by the man, is a gigantic pastry froster, and he jerks it down onto her face in great globs of pink and green and yellow” (*Eat Cake* 13). The pleasant colors and the confectionary, normally images of delight, become signs of intrusion, coercion, and (not just vaguely) masturbation. Again, the eating is unwelcome, undesired, and implicitly reminiscent of the suggested rape. The constant commanding, the strange oral fixation, the

threats: all suggest the violence of a rapist undercutting the innocence of cake, a more or less innocuous picture of festivity. Further, the cake imagery here parallels that of ejaculation, and thus aggressive male sexuality. The phrase "jerks it" suggests the masturbatory slang of "jerkoff" or "jerking off," which seems the intended usage in this context. Thus, the pastry bag becomes a stand-in for the absent sex organ, one that never makes an appearance in the play. Nevertheless, rape is a result of this scene, and the Man in his monstrous form has gratified himself, distorting the daily pleasantry of baked goods into the horrific form of a colorful yet grotesque post-climactic mess.

Nevertheless, we cannot forget the possibility (and plausibility) that this man is in fact from the screen. Van Itallie further suggests that the Man is just an image from the screen: "*He gets up and, unseen by her, slips out the door. His voice comes over the television now.* […] *The woman looks up from her eating suddenly. She realizes she is alone. The moment she does realize this the voice and the music from the television, which have been going on in one way or another throughout the play, stop*" (*Eat Cake* 13). These stage directions again connect the Man directly with the image that was formerly on the screen. Ironically, as the Man leaves the apartment, his voice moves back to the TV that is in the other room, seemingly without substance, though clearly not without influence. All actions of sexuality or desire are purely mediated within this context, acting at a remove. Notice again that the Man never touches the Woman throughout the play, exploiting her agency to the extent that he makes her perform the action of eating through verbal rather than physical coercion. Even with the frosting, the Man never touches the Woman physically, but rather uses various media (television, phone calls, food) to express this underlying sexuality. Rape, in this case, is not defined by the expressly sexual, but instead the physical manipulation one inflicts on another.

In this way, Van Itallie's play may be collapsing back into the lack of substance demonstrated in *TV*. Perhaps the figure was never in the room and the victimization was purely psychological. The instantaneity of the transfer from room to screen comes so abruptly as to be rather staggering, suggesting that the Man in the room was always just the voice on the screen. However, the physical results trump the psychological: there is a trace of his coercion that does suggest that the Woman has been affected. By the end of the play, before the Man leaves, the Woman "*is very fat now. Her frilly nightgown is filthy with cake. She looks white and greenish in the face. There is chocolate, cake and vomit, all around, napkins smeared with cake, etc.*" (13). The Woman inhabits a dense corporeality: waste and residue are the ruins of her symbolic rape. Without touching, the image has destroyed her. The crux of these plays hinges on the imposition of the image onto the body, whether or not the image has a touch or true weight. Such does not seem to be the issue here: van Itallie's plays suggest a concern with the effects on the body more than the substance of the image. In "The Jean-Claude van Itallie Papers in the Department of Special Collections and Archives at Kent State University," Gene A. Plunka suggests,

> van Itallie's theater functions as a therapeutic cure to heal personal and global afflictions. Van Itallie challenges us to realize that we are not cut-off heads vulnerable to manipulation. The healing power of his theater invites us to become aware of how we separate mind from body, cutting off consciousness and thereby allowing ourselves to be commercially or politically, or psychologically manipulated by individuals or institutions. (113)

Perhaps somewhat grand in scope as far as how drama relates to the world (and idealistic as far as the plays as a "cure"), Plunka's description reveals a complicated relation between image and viewer in that the masses encountering these images are "manipulated." Though not expressly

touching on the plays discussed above, his generalization about the works of the playwright does fit well in terms of the problem at hand. The viewing room trio have lost their consciousness, adopting roles rather than personalities. They behave according to the modes of stock characters on television. Similarly, The Woman's non-penetrative rape demonstrates a conformity to the image's will.

In these situations, the dichotomy of mind and body suggested by Plunka is particularly pronounced in that each of these characters becomes pure body in this model: the will of the mind, the agency of self-reflection, is lost. The only moment a character regains any modicum of agency happens at the end of *Eat Cake*, precisely when the Woman is alone again after the Man (or image) has left. It is then that she realizes the horror of her situation and cries "rape" repeatedly (*Eat Cake* 13). Accordingly, after the image, we are left with the weight of reality, the mess of the cake, so to speak. The undeniable consequence of the image, at least in this case, is overconsumption: even the physical is undercut by the ocular spectacle of the cake frosting and varieties of color. Van Itallie seems to suggest there is no outside, for all is subject to the image, subject to being watched. Plunka posits van Itallie as a cure; it would seem, instead, that there is no cure at all as the encounter with the image leaves these characters irrevocably changed and unable to escape the influence of the dominance of the televised image.

Chapter Two

The Liminal Screen:

The Return of the Image in *The America Play*

"An echo like no other an echo that will not die and fall and forget and be forgotten."
~Odelia Pandahr in *Devotees in the Garden of Love*[19]

"All theater comes against the inevitability of disappearance from *the struggle to appear*."
~Herbert Blau in *Take Up the Bodies*[20]

Yet another fascination with the television is the possibility of the image reaching outwards, entering our reality as if the screen has become an open window rather than a closed pane. Where Jean-Claude van Itallie emphasizes an image that has a severe weight, Suzan-Lori Parks continues in this line and introduces the idea of an image in the form a body returning from the dead repeatedly. In both cases, the contents of the television may spill forth, confounding what we call real with what is deemed fiction. Inside the screen is no longer separate from the outside, and the console becomes a navigable space. This strange behavior of the screen, full of a new form of embodiment that propagates itself is explored even more deeply in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*, which portrays an African-American Abraham Lincoln look-alike returning from the dead through this same medium. The play's protagonist, the Foundling Father, embodies simulation as he allows people to pay to recreate the famous Lincoln assassination in the first act of the play. The second act features the man's wife, Lucy, and their son, Brazil, as they unearth artifacts, including a bizarre TV, which seems to summon the Foundling Father from the grave. The final scenes center on the three characters discussing the anomalous return of the dead man brought back by the console until he repeats his death one last time. Thus, the screen becomes the liminal space through which the dead can communicate with the living as the

[19] Parks 150.
[20] Blau, *Take Up* 298.

image stretches out of the space. The Foundling Father speaks in dialogue with Lucy and Brazil, both estranged from the man in this life and now re-experiencing the so-called "echo" of his appearance on the screen and as it passes onto the stage in person. Here, we see an anxiety as well as a curiosity centered on the television screen, especially when it becomes an aperture to our world. The screen is home to that which is other, yet simultaneously something that can be permeated and entered/exited. Essentially, the screen not only breaks apart the distinguishing line between the dead and the living in *The America Play*, but also becomes the space in which simulation blends into the real. Ultimately, the television screen in the play becomes an element of the uncanny, bringing forth images that should be fictional, but refuse to stay confined within the console, conflating the boundaries of the screen and those of our world.

Embodiment, Performance, and the Absent Screen

In regard to the academic discussion about *The America Play*, there is little commentary on Suzan-Lori Parks' work in relation to the function of the screen in the play. What generally circulates in the conversation about the work focuses on either the postmodern implications of revising history through the Foundling Father and his representation of Abraham Lincoln[21] or issues of race and gender in the postmodern era.[22] Although these are a prominent focus of the existing scholarship, I will focus primarily on the function of the television console in the play. This object tends to be absent in the discussions surrounding the play or mentioned only in summary, which is peculiar as it is a primary prop and figure towards the drama's end. The TV itself plays a significant role in generating the unsettling dialogue between the Foundling Father

[21]See Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010). Print.
[22] See Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color(blind): Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011). Print. See also Lisa M. Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). Print.

and his family at the end of the play as well as bringing the man back from the grave. Generally, though, if the screen is referenced, it is usually in passing. Thus, I will take this object and amplify its significance for this text because it certainly serves not just as a prop, but as a mechanism to explore the problems of encountering simulation and distinguishing it from reality (or, rather, the impossibility of doing so according to Jean Baudrillard). Certainly a technology of this caliber merits a detailed discussion and due consideration as its position within the play is anything but extraneous.

In conjunction with this blur, I will also examine the physicality of the image and its return: even though the image comes from the screen, it has physical weight. The image desires interaction and connection, as demonstrated by the scene in which the Foundling Father asks to embrace his kin (Parks 196). The subsequent rejection of this gesture emphasizes both the physicality of the image, one that desires to be touched and embraced, as well as the uncanny. The image is indeed familiar, but oddly so. Further, the repetition of the death sequence throughout the play emphasizes a similar physicality: the image can (and will) die as simulation repeats itself. Discussing a wide array of African American drama, Soyica Diggs Colbert's *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* comes close to the material qualities of the play. In this text, Colbert posits that "*The America Play* advances a model of bodily materialization through performance; however, it purposefully stages replicas and repetitions to demonstrate how those performances may shift over time and serve to manage and transform inheritances" (7). Colbert explores embodiment, but her argument focuses more closely on the racial depictions in the play and its larger cultural significance. I will focus instead on the TV as an object integral to the play's structural composition and the function of memory in relation to embodiment more generally.

Colbert's argument acknowledges the performative repetition of *The America Play*, which Suzan-Lori Parks calls "Rep & Rev" (Parks 8-10). Parks uses this structure throughout her works, using it as "a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. – with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised" (8-9). This strategy generates a rhythm, as Parks states, but beyond this, it is important to note that the repetition is altered each time, modifying not only rhythm, but also content: "Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew" (9). Below, I will examine a similar *bodily materialization* as suggested by Colbert, but more closely related to the image of the screen. In conjunction with this, I will discuss not just the repeats in dialogue, but also in scene. Much that is embodied onstage is repetitive, what Parks calls "a literal incorporation of the past" (10). The past repeats, but freshly so in the present tense as memory dons a sense of body.

Due to the nature of the spectacular within this particular scene of the play and the bizarre nature of embodiment, performance theory may well shed light on how this screen has larger implications that extend out of the written text and onto the stage. Because of this, I will incorporate Herbert Blau's theories of performance to discuss the image as well as the nature of repetition throughout the dialogue. The "Rep & Rev" strategy employed by Parks not only suggests a breaching of the line between simulation and the real, but also demonstrates the bizarre duality of absence in embodiment onstage. The image invoked by the screen is akin to the image manifested in the body of the actor, which empties itself of its former self to signify something new. In this way, the Foundling Father becomes to some extent an exploration of the nature of theater: his return is absent of body, and the actor who plays this man becomes a similar absence. Further, the descriptions in Blau's books suggest something related to Jean

Baudrillard's definition of simulacra, noting particularly the situation of the actor within the fiction and the audience's relation to viewing the void created by simulating. Within Blau's argument is also a tinge of the uncanny, a return of the repressed, something that enters but should not be made manifest onstage. The actor stands as a bizarre rift in temporality, which, fittingly, is replicated in the return of the Foundling Father through the television.

In particular, the television screen at the end of the play becomes the portal to bringing forth the past and reiterating it in the present. To discuss this corporeal television image as well as the crossing of simulation into reality, I rely on the application of theory to open a new conversation examining how the screen functions within *The America Play*. I also intend, then, to examine the play through the theories delineated by Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard in relation to the image's formulation as an object entering reality. The former examines the liminal space that is the screen in much detail in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* As the image exits the TV, it becomes a horrific event that bears significant trauma. The latter examines both simulation and image as well as their social significance in *Simulacra and Simulation*, which will be particularly relevant to the representations of the deceased as living images. Both of these theorists examine the nature of image in relation to social reality, and will be useful for a discussion of the bizarre TV in Parks' play.

***The America Play* and Simulation**

This postmodern television screen is rife with binary breakdowns. In particular, one that is prominent is the lack of distinction between on/off: what constitutes defining lines between (allegedly) diametrical oppositions such as image/reality, onscreen/offscreen, or life/death? Parks' use of this technology in the play serves a larger purpose of exploring the answers to this

question. After his death, the Foundling Father experiences a resurrection: "The TV comes on. The Foundling Father's face appears" (194). His first reappearance is marked by the separation of the external world from the internal world of the screen. According to the text, this TV is specifically the apparatus that allows the man to come back from the grave. Prior to this arrival, Lucy's ear picks up faint traces of the past, sound that corresponds to what she calls an "Echo" (184). The man now represents what his wife calls "thuh Disembodied Voice. Also known as 'Thuh Whispers.' Category: Related. Like your Fathuhs" (184). Before the man passes onto the stage out of the screen, he appears to be but an echo of the past, just like "The Lincoln Play" on the screen that continues to run through "G. The Great Beyond," resounding through time. Still, even if this is a repetition of the past, Parks' method of Rep & Rev demonstrates that each return is simultaneously repeating the past as well as occurring in a novel sense: revision entails the new.

Throughout the play, there is an anticipation of the Father's return as the echoes continue repeatedly, yet every occurrence bears something unique. Interestingly enough, Lucy dons the role of theorist here, determining the rules by which the play must abide. According to her, echoes can be categorized into sets and degrees of separation from the original as they rapidly approach the original itself. The first degree is "thuh sound," the second "thuh words" or "Thuh Whispers" (184). Lucy's own theory, though put into different terms, parallels Baudrillard's "successive phases of the image," which he lists as the following:

> it is the reflection of a profound reality;
>
> it masks and denatures a profound reality;
>
> it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;

> it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (*Simulacra* 6)

With each succession, the image grows increasingly distant from the reality it once represented. The final stage removes any connection. Rather than having a severed connection (i.e. no relation it possessed prior), the simulacrum exists in and of itself, never having had any relation to any reality whatsoever. Lucy's theory seems to suggest that the echo is the third stage in that an echo fills the gap left by the original. However, as will be discussed below, certain complications arise that imply that the echo of the Father is of the fourth stage Baudrillard lists.

The repetitions mixed with new dialogue and genuine interaction mark the return of the Foundling Father as an echo *sans* prior reality. Further, Lucy's discussion of the voice indicates that it generates from a non-diegetic source - it springs from the abyss. Here, then, we see that the man whispers across time and space, an intimate message that Lucy, perhaps something of a sensitive, can hear. Importantly, she notes that the voice is *Disembodied*, implying that this echo of the second degree (Parks 184) is completely separate from the original. The word itself implies that the voice has an origin outside of the body, that the echo originates in itself. Even when the voice ceases to speak in, say, a cavern, the voice returns until it is diminished. A series of echoes of the initial output reverberates through time: “Note: thuh last words. – And thuh last breaths” (199). Finality is null if the end can repeat itself indefinitely. Albeit there are subsequent modifications each time the Foundling Father comes back from the grave, *thuh last* utterances continue past the point of no return, a point that can only signify nothing if the man speaks past his own death. What distinction is there, then, between each occurrence of an event that repeats itself *ad infinitum*? An endless cycle is spawned.

It might be argued that the man is simply an echo and a repetition in the cycle, simply reflecting the original of what he was in life presented a second time on stage, but Lucy's dialogue reveals certain qualifications of what it is to be an echo that muddle the distinction between life and death, simulation and reality. Her definitions discussed above serve to show the degree of his proximity, and she continues in "C. Archeology" to illuminate the reading of the Foundling Father's return. She defines this one as an "Echo of thuh 3rd sort: thuh body itself" (184). Where sound and words are the first two echoes respectively (184), this third kind brings back not only the likeness of the deceased, but the embodiment of the dead as well. Moreover, when the Foundling Father appears on the screen and no dialogue passes between them at that moment, Lucy's diction reveals something unnerving: "Well. Its him" (194).[23] Again, this echo is also the man himself. Lucy notes that the man on the TV is in fact her late husband. He reappears first in the TV console, but the screen quickly becomes permeable. His likeness enters the stage as if the screen were not a solid membrane,[24] but it is not simply a recording of the past: the man on the screen and onstage is, in fact, physically embodied. The man represents not just a repeat of a so-called "old broadcast." Rather, he is a repeat of the now-deceased man as he was in life, but he is *also* the man himself.

[23] Rather than affix *sic* to quotations from *The America Play*, I will note here that the absence of apostrophes and idiosyncratic spellings are thoroughly intentional on the part of Parks and are used by her to accentuate the mannerisms of speech within her play.

[24] In "G. The Great Beyond," Parks' stage directions note that "Lucy and Brazil watch the TV: a replay of 'The Lincoln Act.' The Foundling Father has returned" (194). Due to the ambiguity of Parks' directions, it can plausibly be interpreted as the Foundling Father returning to the screen a second time, or possibly exiting the box itself. For example, David Wood's review of the IU Theatre's performance of *The America Play* implies that such is the case: "The Foundling Father does reappear. He's anachronistically heralded by a TV unearthed from the dig" and "accepts his place in the coffin" (Wood). The way he is *heralded* is very ambiguous: does he exit the screen, or does the TV serve to announce his presence? In the text, the Foundling Father does state, "I believe this is the place where I do the Gettysburg Address, I believe" (Parks 195). Thus, it appears that he stands with Lucy and Brazil watching "The Lincoln Act" as it plays on the screen rather than speaking from the confines of the frame itself. Though either interpretation may be performed, I will read this scene as if the man has come out of the image and onto the stage, which seems a plausible way to interpret this ambiguity.

Further demonstrating that the Foundling Father is not simply a re-run, so to speak, Lucy explains a problem with thinking that the man standing before her and Brazil is only an echo: "He's dead but not really" (195). The man represents a crossing of the liminal space between life and death. He is in fact dead, but with a certain caveat attached: he may be dead, but he is *also* very much alive. Simultaneity is the best word in this scenario. He is both, suggesting a physical anomaly: an absent origin (which I will discuss in much more depth in Chapter Four in relation to Thomas Pynchon). The nature of simulation, though, is particularly complicated. Baudrillard's description of simulated illness (borrowed from Émile Littré) is completely separate from what we consider faking. Accordingly, where faking means pure pretense, "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.' Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces 'true' symptoms? Objectively one cannot treat him as being either ill or not ill" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 3). Thus, the simulator replicates the "real" symptoms and problematizes any distinguishing lines. In this way, the Foundling Father is dead but not really, as Brazil states above. Which of the two is he if he has died in the past? Both? Neither? Simulation is, again, simultaneity of the two, well beyond the real. Even in the absence caused, the physicality of the echo highlights the embodiment of the man onstage. After the Foundling Father's final assassination reenactment, Brazil reveals "our newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hisself! Note: thuh body sitting propped upright in our great Hole" (Parks 199). Again, the man's echo is physical; his body sits in the hole as a sort of prop for the attraction that is Brazil's own Great Hole of History. There is weight to this figure. There is no permanence of death, even if the echo replays the death the man experienced.

Just as complex is the nature of the performative: much of what can be said of the Foundling Father's contrasting *lack* of weight, so to speak, can be said of the actor who dons the

role. After all, "[e]ach actor is a ghost answering. The who which is there is the respiration of the Other" (Blau, *Take Up* 214). Just as the Ghost haunts Elsinore in *Hamlet*, so does the actor haunt the stage with each performance. Blau suggests here that the actor is an absence, other to himself. Taking on a character implies opening the self to be consumed with otherness. Below, I will discuss this phenomenon in relation to the uncanny in more depth, but here it is important to note the ghostly nature of the act. Something (Other) returns, *answering*: the Ghost is the echo. By its very nature, an echo exists in both past and present, complicating the idea of death itself: it is both the repetition of a past utterance and a sound that plays in the present. As Parks puts it, "History is time that won't quit" (15). Repetition is coded in the nature of an echo. In this way, the Foundling Father's "echo" is one that speaks to his kin in the present moment while the man himself is dead. Temporal binaries also dissolve in the nature of echoes, and thus also those of the real and simulated. Generally, we think of an echo in terms of its proximity to the original spoken phrase, but the *Disembodied voice* is one that can speak of its own accord without a body.

Because of this substitution of the absence for the origin, Baudrillard argues that it becomes impossible to distinguish "the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance" (*Simulacra* 6). In his application of the hyperreal,[25] death and life become less distinct from each other: the Foundling Father possibly never dies because he is always the resurrection of himself. His second life is nothing more than a second resurrection, a second simulation of himself. Even so, the Foundling Father asks "to say a few words from the grave. Maybe a little conversation: Such a long story" (Parks 197). He

[25] In their text *The Postmodern Turn*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner explain Baudrillard's definition of the hyperreal in summary: "The hyperreal is thus the death of the real, but it is a theological death: The real dies only to be reborn, artificially resurrected within a system of signs" (102). Thus, the hyperreal concerns itself with a resurrection of the real in the signs that signify it. The resurrection, then, blurs the original and its repetitions. The only difference is the context in which it occurs as a resurrection implies a return as well as a renewal.

acknowledges his passing but refuses to pass completely, unwilling to move into the world of the dead and keep his silence. His death represents a bodily one, but he himself is not dead, not completely. The embodiment of this man is further reflected in the line before his appearance on the screen: Lucy, particularly nostalgic, cites her "re-memberies" (194). The juxtaposition of *remembe*r, *memory*, and *member* recalls also a fourth term: *dismember*. The idea of this word is plural: she remembers the man, but he is also *re-membered*, pulled together into a unified material body. He is simultaneously memory and person, yet another representation of himself. In this way, the TV image becomes the epitome of the hyperreal as delineated by Baudrillard. Thus, the philosopher posits that "everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 23). But if the resemblance is a hallucination, how do we distinguish which of the two is the origin of hallucination: real or simulation? Could the real be a hallucination itself? The passing of the image from the TV into our plane presents a crisis in ontology: what does it mean to be, to be real? And is it even possible? In the case of *The America Play*, that which appears on the screen becomes a part of the living world – the dead are resurrected.

An Uncanny Echo of the Foundling Father's Echoes

This lack of distinction in the form of resurrection verges on the miraculous, perhaps even Messianic in terms of the return of the dead to the living. However, it is important to consider the horrific as well. Any miracle borders simultaneously on the fantastic as well as the uncanny and terrifying. In an analysis of Aphex Twin's music video for "Come to Daddy," Slavoj Žižek discuss the implications of the body coming through the screen, from image to materialization. Speaking generally on the nature of dreams, he addresses the moment in the

video when the screen grows out of the television, separates itself from the console, and evolves into a biomass that takes the shape of a distorted Aphex Twin (docuville). For Žižek, this biomass represents the uncanny in that "the screen is, in a way, the realm of the undead," and its entrance into our world is terrifying[26] when what "separates us from the screen is transgressed" (docuville). The breaking of this wall is almost a violation, and it bears with it trauma for the spectator. For the context of *The America Play*, *horror* does not seem the appropriate idea that drives the conversation between the deceased and his kin. Nevertheless, it is something of the uncanny. Specifically, Žižek pins the screen as *the realm of the undead*, the place in which the deceased come back to life, their very sphere of existence. The biomass of the screen becomes akin to that of the Foundling Father, then, in that both of the figures are the dead (or, in the case of the biomass, the lifeless) on the screen returning to the living and given life through a reconfiguration.

Such a return is predicated entirely on the uncanny as detailed by Sigmund Freud, whose definition I will utilize for this chapter. According to the famed psychoanalyst, the "uncanny [*Das Unheimliche*] is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (Freud 13). Thus, it is the familiar that has become distorted, misappropriated, refused by the mind, something that has been repressed that is beginning to rise (but not completely making it) to the surface – a description whose image is reminiscent of the "Monster Tableau" from *Eat Cake*. In the case of "Come to Daddy," the uncanny figure is that of the biomass as it bears likeness to humanity, but one whose proportions are distorted, rendered monstrous and skeletal. The horror

[26] Žižek uses the word "horror" in this section of the video (docuville). Because of the German dub, the English audio becomes difficult to hear. Due to several competing translations of the German to English in the comments section of YouTube, I have limited the quotations above to the clearly audible to get Žižek's own words in the original.

arises from how familiar this figure appears – it is a bare (male?) body with the head of Aphex Twin – yet how distant this figure stands from the common conception of what the human body should be. Even more horrific is its "birth" – it leaks from the screen like so much clay as the screen itself becomes flesh, leaving the TV an empty shell. It is simultaneously human in that it has a proportion, gait, flesh, &c., yet the distance between this figure and humanity arises from its generation. It is the distantly familiar: it looks human, but not human enough, or perhaps *too* human. Its corporeal reality is unsettling because one can recognize that it is supposed to be human, but it cannot be because of its lack of organic generation and its bizarre frame. *The America Play* does not quite parallel the violent return of this image, but it does reflect the oddity: what is it to discuss with a man who is dead, whose funeral is in planning? Unsettling, to say the least.

Even if Lucy and Brazil betray no sense of shock, there is both a sense of novelty as well as estrangement: they refuse proximity to what they once knew. The uncanny arises in this return not simply because the man has come back from the dead, but also from his simultaneous distance *and* immediacy. First, as has been stated previously, the man is an echo of the past in the present tense, immediately sounding in spite of his distance from the original. Further, as Freud suggests of the repressive qualities of the uncanny, the two continually refuse the man's return to some degree: "Sssssht. […] Well. Its him" (Parks 194). Although the play does not indicate much of a strong reaction, there is nevertheless an underlying tension, a desire to forget, and a sense of pain or resentment. Lucy's muted use of the expletive *shit* suggests frustration with this image, something she would rather not approach, which is further confirmed by her refusal to allow it to embrace her (196-7). A safe distance is maintained to prevent the image from getting too close, for allowing it to do so presents something undesirable, perhaps even

dangerous for the reality Lucy inhabits. If we take the actions of van Itallie’s *Eat Cake* or *TV* as any indication, perhaps this is understandable. If the former were applied to the present situation, Lucy’s hesitation could be due to fear of physical harm; if the latter, the coordinates of her reality would be so dramatically shifted that she may cease to be the same, altered entirely by the image.

The social real has been breached: this man cannot be here, but the Foundling Father no longer abides by the rules of reality. An impossibility has nevertheless occurred, defying the logic of the real. Lucy’s theory of echoes suggests that this play operates on the level of the surreal: this return is always a possibility. However, even if this is the case, the return betrays the absence of the man in the lives of the wife and son as well as the discomfort of approaching an image without origin. This underlying tension is not without due cause, for the nature of simulation is unsettling to its core. It upsets any notion of stable reality. Baudrillard writes, "Simulation is infinitely more dangerous [than violence against the real] because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*" (*Simulacra* 20). The danger arises in that social order itself crumbles under the weight(lessness) of the simulation, namely pointing to the rules of the game as arbitrary. Because of the manner of the return, and especially due to the prominence of the screen in both cases, it is important to examine in more detail the nature by which the uncanny threatens a stable conception of a normatively regulated reality. By this, I mean to suggest that daily life operates on a set of underlying principles that are taken for granted: social behavior, physics, life, death, &c., allegedly operate according to an acceptable and expected mode. That is, even if the return of an image and the speaking dead are a social reality these figures live with inside the world established by the play, Lucy and Brazil find it unsettling.

Moreover, the (im)materiality of the image in performance evokes this same sensation. According to Blau, "What the audience sees in performance is thus, with more or less *pre*tense of a material presence, an invitation to an absence – 'there is no more but this' – the living image of its own mirage. Meanwhile, what is preserved in the *idea* of the audience is the expectancy that it will somehow rematerialize, out of something vaguely remembered, such as a ritual obligation" (*The Audience* 54). Much like Baudrillard's description of simulacra, a performance lacks the real. Within this particular scene of *The America Play*, one might consider a double audience: the literal audience watching the performance on the stage as well as Lucy and Brazil watching the Foundling Father. The man on the stage is a dual absence. First, he represents the man as he was while he was alive, as a body rather than an echo. Second, the Foundling Father on the stage is not a person so much as a performance. In this way, the uncanniness of Parks' character is amplified by the theater itself: the audience is always already watching the emptiness of events that have taken place, never occur, and are currently happening. The Foundling Father is not the only physical anomaly. Rather, the play takes place in the present as a spectacle to be watched by the audience, playing in real time. Still, there is the implication that this "real time" is not a lived reality. Performers act out a scene that happens only in a fictional sense, an obvious suspension of disbelief. We say that an audience may be lost in the fiction, forgetting that the play is a performance, but that never really dissolves the line between the stage and the external world. However, the repetition of the events, namely in restaging night after night through the years, implies an endurance for a bizarre spatiotemporal event: can we say that the events onstage actually happen? Such is a concern for Blau that also underlies *The America Play*. Are not Lucy and Brazil in the same predicament as the audience watching the play? Are they not watching

something that cannot physically happen, something anomalous? The theater stages the death night after night, and the internal world of the fiction is recreated again and again.

To some extent, the theater is a purgatorial space of repetitions. Soyica Diggs Colbert notes, “In staging a melodramatic scene of mourning at the replica of the Great Hole of History, the play reclaims that negative physical and psychic space, an apparent vacuum, and fills it with performance” (7). Colbert’s use of the term *vacuum* is analogous to Blau’s theory: the stage as a place of absence. Blau suggests that the stage “resembles consciousness itself” (*Take Up* 7). For both, embodiment is less about the body than what is embodied in this space of the mind, of the theater. Acting is a means to fill this space, but with what? Blau himself notes something of the uncanny when discussing the nature of The Ghost in *Hamlet*: “The Ghost is the thing which is not-a-thing, like the trace in the unconscious which, as Freud conceives it, cannot return *as such*, but only as a *prospect*, precipitous, scarred, scary, and circuitous – yet something desired, *preferential*, as if chosen by memory from what it wishes to forget. The paradoxes are dazzling and haunt our memory” (95). The implications of haunting entail duration. One is not haunted by a ghost that shows up one night on the off-chance of being noticed. To haunt is to be seen in a spectacular way. Haunting is a repetition: it is the “Rep & Rev” style of the play that heightens the unsettling. The Foundling Father surfaces, but with modification each time. No return is identical. Further, Blau notes Freud in relation to the unconscious and the hold of the Ghost over it. Might not the uncanny also be defined as the embodiment of the absent? Blau’s language betrays a seeming impossibility: *is* and *not-a-thing* stand as polar opposites of ontology. The first implies physicality, the other its contradiction. To act, then, is to enter this space in order to become empty. In this sense, embodiment is the representation of an image rather than a body. It is to inhabit space without occupying it, a paradox.

But, for Lucy and Brazil, this situation seems plausible (if not accepted) as they respond with a somewhat flat affect towards the end of the scene. Still, the possibility of an occurrence this bizarre does not lessen the oddness of the situation as it is nevertheless a break from the general norm. Even if, for example, a car crash is always a real possibility, the actual occurrence and its gruesome nature are not diminished by the fact that the crash was always a potential. When this modality is broken, the one who experiences the rupture simultaneously encounters a break in the rules as well as a trauma of varying degree. This becomes particularly pronounced when the dividing line of the screen itself shatters. In a discussion of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), Ari J. Blatt suggests a similar violent nature, one that threatens stable reality. He argues that "television poses such a threat to many because it is now such a pervasive and ubiquitous force that, in certain venues, it has become difficult to tell where reality ends and TV begins" (149). Although he speaks most specifically about Cronenberg's film, the theory holds for Parks' play. The console itself becomes indistinguishable from the reality that surrounds it: the image on the screen becomes a means to understanding and perceiving reality. More acutely, the image *becomes* reality, and *vice versa*. Blatt continues, "we have become so accustomed to treating the small screen as a 'virtual window' onto the world, that reality (often of the most gritty and hard to stomach variety) can sometimes take on the shape and feel of an image" (150). Here, Blatt notes that reality is easily conflated with simulation and that social reality is very much dictated by what the viewer sees. But the reverse certainly holds true, that simulation is donning the appearance of reality. These texts represent an augmentation of Blatt's *virtual window* as the uncanny steps through the screen when that *window* becomes a door.

Through this door enters the figure once lost: the Foundling Father lives again. The nature of life and death may well be null at this point. The screen is the crossing of the two:

death enters (even becomes) life. Parks herself notes something similar about the people who populate her plays: "A person from, say, time immemorial, from, say, PastLand, from somewhere back there, say, walks into my house. She or he is always alone and will almost always take up residence in a corner. […] Why they choose a corner to stand in I don't know either – maybe because it's the intersection of 2 directions – maybe because it's safe" (12). First, she comments on the fact that these figures come from *PastLand, from somewhere back there*. Again, we see her use of Rep & Rev as a way to *rev*isit and *rev*ise. The past is a place that is populated as if people live there in the present tense. Further, they take up residence in a corner, a perpendicular meeting of two walls, a meeting of two directions in a single point.

It appears that Parks views the TV as another corner, one where PastLand intersects with the still living. The dead come to this corner, populate it. In the case of the play, it seems that the TV becomes the corner of the dead, housing the memory. The object that is in itself something of the domestic (i.e. television sets are more likely to appear indoors in a home than out in an archeological dig) becomes a channel for the dead. The placement of this console in Brazil's dig suggests further estrangement from the image: the object is unearthed as a historical artifact (193). The TV itself is oddly juxtaposed with a number of other artifacts that are much more closely related: Lincoln's bust, a box with Abraham Lincoln's initials, various awards, bones, &c. (198-199). Each of these objects, whether replicas or originals, suggests a specific context in which the TV should not exist. The Foundling Father's recreation of the assassination, for example, could not (rationally) include a TV, heightening the anachronism of this screen.

The inclusion of this technology outside of its time interrogates the nature of linearity: the return of something past in the present tense breaks the normative spatiotemporal expectations. On the nature of acting and theater, Blau states that "[w]e are suicidal and genocidal. We are

randomly destructive. We violate our space by the mere living of it. We are the victimizing eyes unblessed by the victims we may become. The damage we've done to the world is appalling, immeasurable. We are the ruins of time. […] *We are what happened*" (*Take Up* 7). Certainly, this is not a literal claim, yet the nature of theater is that of destruction, perpetual *ruins*. Although talking heavily on what he sees as the violence of theater, Blau's comments betray a sense of spatiotemporal breach. The actor *violate[s] our space* by taking on a role, emptying his body of its original signification. For example, Laurence Olivier ceases to *be* Laurence Olivier when he becomes Hamlet. The actor *is* and *isn't* the character, revealing the paradoxical nature of the body. In conjunction with this, the image of the Foundling Father is a spatial violation: he appears solid, yet for all intents and purposes cannot be as he is an echo. His return is the paradox Blau notes above. The performative body, then, takes on a signification of the past.

In her essay "Possession," Suzan-Lori Parks explains the temporal importance of writing theater: "Through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line – creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined" (5). The nature of theater is that of making the impossible possible for Parks. She injects events into the timeline, reaching into the past to plant the seeds of an event that is both new and historical. Blau suggests a similar nature to historical construction. With a deep finality, Blau's statement, *We are what happened*, implies a monumental nature to ontology and embodiment. To be is to be the past incarnate: Lucy's *re-memberies* (Parks 194). The title of Parks' essay suggests the performative body's nature as a vessel to be filled with an external source, perhaps by Blau's figure of the Ghost. We are not corporeal so much as we are the substance of chronology. We have bodies, but what we are made of is, according to Blau, contingent on experience rather than the physical. What we see, what we feel, what we encounter through time is what defines the performative "body." Thus,

though the body is lost to death, the Foundling Father's return is this performative "body," a signifier of the past. In the margins of her essay, Parks writes, "memory / un-remembered / dis-membered / re-member / 'his bones cannot be found' / putting the body back together" (5). Her connection of history to embodiment implies a performative nature to both history and theater, which she sees as intertwined. Her play on words indicates that memory is not a substance of the brain so much as a direct result of reconstructing and deconstructing the body: "The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play – something that through a production *actually happens* – I'm working theatre like an incubator to create 'new' historical events. I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history" (4-5). Something of the macabre, the suggestion here is that the absence of the body (note that bones are only the frame) leaves a trace of history, something to reconstruct and give embodiment to through performance. Much like a museum might attempt to give body to the bones of an extinct animal for the sake of an exhibit, Parks sees theater as the opportunity to give validity to historical events that need shaping and development before being placed in their proper contexts. It is the literal plugging into the past of something that has never happened, yet will. Stepping outside the body, so to speak, the actor finds the medium of expression, and for Parks, Blau's suggestion of an actor's body that others itself allows for an exploration of the spatiotemporal situation of the stage: what takes place in this absence?

Because of the absence, the uncanniness of the situation is amplified as the Foundling Father asks for his kin to embrace him. They both respond, "Not yet" (196; 197). Though not as horrific as the monstrous biomass-turned-humanoid of "Come to Daddy," Lucy and Brazil both realize that this figure is the dead man and the echo intertwined. He is the *too* familiar of the uncanny. As stated above, Baudrillard's claim in relation to the lack of distinction between

reality and its semblance becomes the thing that is at stake in the development of the uncanny. As Brazil and Lucy communicate with this third echo, there are hints that they find this moment rather unsettling – they are in fact speaking with the deceased about whether or not his funeral will be "[o]pen casket or closed" (196). To discuss this topic *postmortem*, one would not generally expect the deceased to have any input on the matter. Further, Lucy has acknowledged the death of her husband in the first scene of the second act of *The America Play*: "Then he died. Your Daddy died right here." (181). Not only has the man died, but Lucy notes also the exact place in terms of space and time. She pinpoints the moment in which the man has died and (for all intents and purposes) left this world of the real. Nevertheless, the man continues to echo, first in the silence of the TV,[27] and then in passing through the screen. The spatiotemporal point Lucy marks ceases to signify the permanence of death – the screen is the liminal space of crossing over into the realm of the uncanny.

The Bullet: Finality and its Echoes

Further expanding this unsettling nature of the screen, the image's return suggests a difficult approach to finality: what is the end? The play continues in yet another bizarre direction as the man's image passes back into the dead. Again. The death of the Foundling Father, the image becoming physical, suggests the material quality of the bullet that appears to have killed him. Ultimately, the image bears significance for reality and physically affects it. As is the case in *Eat Cake* in the previous chapter, the image has real-world implications, a weight that can physically touch (or potentially harm) the real. The image of the bullet is, thus, the bullet itself. The passing of the image comes, again, as a violation. Slavoj Žižek argues, "what happened on

[27] Brazil notes that the "Sound duhnt work" as "The Lincoln Act" plays on the screen and the Foundling Father takes the stage (Parks 195).

September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality)" (*Welcome* 16). The violence of the echo in this case is something that needs to be addressed: if the image enters reality, what are the consequences other than the blurring of the image with its origins? First is the violent destruction of reality *proper*. For Žižek, 9/11 destroyed the difference between the image and the real, but not without trauma on a larger scale for the US. Due to this massive shift in social reality, the image can usher in the destruction of the real.

This violence of the image is demonstrated in the final scenes of *The America Play*, but, strangely, the bullet is absent. The stage directions of the play indicate the termination of the echo: "(*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes. The Foundling Father 'slumps in his chair'*)" (Parks 198). Oddly enough, it is the sound itself rather than the object that "kills" the Foundling Father. The death of the father is always apparently absent in the play as we never see anything but repetitions of the original death: performances of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, and possibly the death of the Foundling Father in repetition. Still, the death itself never appears on stage. It is only through Lucy's dialogue and the return of the man as image-made-flesh that we understand that he is truly dead.

But if his echo can return once, can it return again? As Blau says of the Ghost, "it must somehow appear again tonight. If it doesn't, there is no performance" (*Take Up* 214). Such a performance is dual. The actor playing the Foundling Father must reprise his role, must repeat, must "haunt" the stage with his role. As stated above, he acts out a scene that happens in real time, yet does not possess real weight. Simultaneously, the second (third? fourth? hundredth?) death of the Foundling Father in repetition *is* the performance. The sound of the gunshot echoes

more than once in the present tense above. The Foundling Father will always already be both dying and dead, and the repetition of the gunshot *sans* bullet suggests that the absence is also the bullet itself. Lucy subsequently listens for the echoes but hears "Nothin" (Parks 198). The man sits silently, dead again, implying that death is not singular. Ultimately, Brazil's carnivalesque introductions to the newest attraction give the echo a firmer grounding in bodily finality: "Note: thuh body sitting propped upright in our great Hole. Note the large mouth opened wide. Note the top hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: thuh great black hole – thuh great black hole in thuh great head. – And how this great head is bleedin. – Note: thuh last words. – And thuh last breaths. – And how thuh nation mourns –" (199). The image of the man is predicated on a repetition of dying: he does not simulate slumping, but rather *slumps* and bleeds in real time again – this action has happened before. The descriptions listed signify the real nature of the death of the image: it *is bleedin* currently. Moreover, the hole in the head signifies both the placement of the bullet as well as its absence in this case. As there is no gun present, the gunshot itself kills the Foundling Father in this manifestation. The bullet may be absent, but the echo itself bores a hole through *thuh great head*. Absence of object does not mean the absence of its effects, in this case.

The repetition suggests that a simulated action carried out without the *knowledge* of simulation becomes reality: Baudrillard amplifies this lack of distinction, demonstrating that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish whether or not this is pure simulation. According to Baudrillard, after so long, a simulation will inevitably be mistaken for the real and collapse into the rules of the real even when the simulation is pure fiction:

> Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the

> criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the "truth," in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricably mixed up with real elements (a policeman will really fire on sight; a client of the bank will faint and die of a heart attack; one will actually pay you the phony ransom), in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real. (*Simulacra* 20)

In particular, Baudrillard points at a scenario in which the pretender emulates the real so closely that, because the signifiers of fiction are not apparent to the audience of unwitting participants, the event itself becomes mistaken for a real hostage situation. The longer something performs as the real, the more likely it is to become the real, even while remaining fiction.

The gun is always fake, but as a symbol it becomes a very real threat. Is the simulation less a simulation due to its mistaken identity as the real? Yes and no. Yes, in that the law progresses according to the rules of the real: gun + hostage situation = real response on the part of the officers. No, in that the gun is no more real than it was at the beginning. The actor hostage, perhaps now traumatized by the incidental response more than the setup and deaths mentioned in the scenario, is still an actor and was never a real hostage, &c. Similarly, the fact that the image bleeds this time implies that the man met his death from the simulation of Lincoln's assassination: the gun was actually loaded at least once, for a bullet would have to be required for the Foundling Father to bleed.

Further suggesting a repetition rather than an end, the dialogue of the play ends on a dash rather than a period where the two previous sentences indicate a sense of closure. *Thuh nation*

mourns in a plurality of senses. If we take Abraham Lincoln as the original, then the Foundling Father is always already an echo and never an original, and thus the mourning is for a loss of the true Lincoln. The recreated assassination is a stand-in, a monument. If we take the play's echoes as an example of how an action will repeat itself for an indeterminate amount of time,[28] will the mourning ever truly end or is it a ceaseless repetition, perhaps even of an earlier mourning? Once something occurs, it is also its own memory, its own potential to be remembered or recounted in the future. Blau opens *The Audience* with a rather illuminating quotation from Virginia Woolf that amplifies this idea to the performative: "No audience. No echo. That's part of one's death" (1). This tragedy is circumvented in the context of the play by the double audience of Lucy/Brazil and those in the chairs in the theater: being watched, being *seen* is a way to echo. With an audience comes an extension of one's visibility and, thus, the echo never ceases. Woolf's definition of death thus implies an infinite return of Foundling Fathers because of the echo in the play. Even when he dies, he returns in sound and image. The Foundling Father exists in this *endless loop* of past and present. Echoes *ad infinitum*. The circularity of the end implies that finality is null as any simulation can be repeated indefinitely. As an example, a VHS is simultaneously the playing of the film and the potential to be played again when a viewer desires: the frames are always present in the cassette, and the entirety of the film exists as a potential viewing within the object. Similarly, the TV here may bring the Foundling Father back again in the future, suggesting that the dash is not insignificant. Because of its position as an object of reception (i.e. while off, the TV is still the potential to pick up a broadcast), The TV in *The America Play* serves also as a symbol of anticipation, always ready for the next simulation to

[28] I suggest an indeterminate period because the text indicates no sense of how far apart the death of the Foundling Father and his subsequent resurrection are from each other. Because of the lack of spatiotemporal cues, the distance between each echo could be arbitrary and sporadic rather than reflecting a sense of structured physics, that is, how echoes function scientifically as an acoustic reflection determined by the nature of space in relation to time.

stir again. The TV is a box that plays re-runs and originals, but the fact is that the original broadcast differs only in temporal space from the original. The style of Rep & Rev suggests that, like the ancient lament, "there is nothing new under the sun."[29] Similarly, a dash is always the potential to continue rather than a definite end. In this way, The Foundling Father is that dash. Each death brings with it a pause rather than a termination and can happen yet again. Thus, the man will resound throughout time and history indefinitely, resurrected time and time again.

[29] New King James Version, Ecclesiastes 1:9.

Chapter Three

The Dead Screen:

Death, Memory, and Ghost Images in the Digital Mausoleum

"Is this heaven? Or am I in television?"
Master Shake[30]

Though the Foundling Father exits the screen repeatedly in *The America Play*, demonstrating a direct connection between memory and the screen, some texts represent a contrasting view of death on the screen, one that forbids the deceased the ability to leave. Though bodies return to the screen, there seems to be an equal fascination with instances in which one is irrevocably trapped behind the confines of the glass. A recent trend in smartphone-centric humor revolves around taking a picture of one's contacts with their faces pressed against a window and displaying said image when the contact calls. The illusion is one that simulates the user's contacts being trapped behind the glass of the iPhone itself, ensnared by the apparatus until the user swipes a finger across the phone to accept the call. [31] A joke, yes, but what this technological trick centers on is the idea that in using a given technology, one can theoretically be trapped in it. The very physicality on which the joke is predicated hints at the plausibility that behind the screen is an indefinite space which one may traverse and, ultimately, in which one might become lost. Our technophilic society appears to have a hidden technophobia: how immersed can one become in a device, and, once stuck inside, how inescapable is this new technosphere? A user of a given technology can become so enmeshed in it that his reality becomes shaped by it, that his reality can be entirely mediated and determined by the parameters

[30] "Baffler Meal" episode of *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* (TheBrakAttack).
[31] The instructions above the picture example explicitly state, "Take a picture of a friend with their face squished against glass. Assign to phone contact. It'll look like they're trapped inside your phone" ("Take a Picture"). Even the description betrays claustrophobia: *squished*, *against*, *trapped inside*.

of the digital apparatus. The use of a device, then, equates the technology itself to a space that requires navigation, literally and metaphorically. On the one hand, any device requires the user to familiarize himself with how it works, what buttons' functions are, and what other features it possesses. It also carries with it a new signification system, and the user must learn to navigate it. The use of the device can hold the user's attention in such a way that viewership is rendered static: the viewer stares at the screen for an indeterminate amount of time. Even the imprisoning metaphor of the cell phone serves to show literal consequences for the viewer: time wasted on the screen is time that could be used elsewhere, and time spent staring is a form of captivation that is virtually impossible to escape. Thus, where the previous chapter examined the screen as a portal and doorway between realms, this chapter intends to explore the screen as a barrier.

The texts I will address below, though exaggerated in some cases, have similarly severe ramifications for the technologically obsessed society we are immersed in. More and more, we are seeing people consumed with their "smart" devices, oblivious to the world around. This well explains the recent trends like the commercials aimed towards preventing car wrecks caused by people texting while driving.[32] In one way, we can look at this shift of perception as a move between two screens. One might note the screen-like quality of the windshield as a screen[33] to a world outside the car, one that requires navigating, compared to a more easily pliable and

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[32] See campaigns related to reducing texting-related car crashes such as www.stoptextsstopwrecks.org and www.itcanwait.com. Both aim to highlight the higher death count caused by people who focus too heavily on their phones while driving. Thus, digital distraction leads to actual physical consequences.

[33] Certainly I am not the first to make this connection. One such analogy appears in Anne Friedberg's "Urban Mobility and Cinematic Visuality," in which the author discusses the connections of the cinema, the automobile, and Los Angeles. She states, "The windshield is *the* permeable membrane between Los Angeles and its screens" (Friedberg 186). Although the windshield is not the screen itself, the definition suggests that viewing the real world through the screen is, to some extent, a way to *view* the screen: "If Los Angeles itself is an endless cinema screen seen through the windshield *or* a private television tuned to a channel of vision determined by the driver's grasp on the steering wheel, then how does the architecture of the Los Angeles movie theatre – the palace, the drive-in, the multiplex – provide a frame for the *virtual* mobility of cinema spectatorship?" (186). The question here equates driving with viewing and the world with a new form of viewership. Instead of participating in the world by driving, one *watches*. The windshield here becomes a model for examining the world at a remove, much like watching a television program. The whole experience, then, becomes a form of mediation rather than direct experience.

manipulated world of user-generated content. With or without the television screen, the human body is now a constant viewer, almost by instinct. Jonathan Crary notes in his *24/7*: "Experience now consists of sudden and frequent shifts from absorption in a cocoon of control and personalization into the contingency of a shared world intrinsically resistant to control" (*24/7* 89). A cocoon is a place of transformation, enveloping the creature inside. But what emerges from this hardening shell? Here, Crary suggests that the use of the screen is a form of social dislocation, that nothing emerges the same as it was: one can look at the screen, manage one's social circles and connections, manipulate cyberspace in a way tailored to the user's individual needs or desires. But when it comes to the outside world, it is not so easily interacted with. It pushes back, and interaction (if not confrontation) with others is inevitable. The screen removes one from the necessity of interacting with others outside of one's own terms, if only temporarily. This traumatic shift between the technosphere and the real world becomes disorienting. What emerges from the cocoon, then, is a passive viewer unable to navigate the real world, unable to cope with the trauma and stress inherent in a world that is indifferent and, more importantly, not immediately editable.

Further, though the texts I will discuss represent a vast expanse of historical context extending from the 1950s to the present, each addresses the nauseating reality that in consumer use of these devices, many forget the surrounding world. Technology changes, but the immersion seems to remain oddly the same. We are seeing mediation of information, often miscommunicated, through the screen. More often than not, the television console is a populace's only "window to the world." Whatever the technology (cell phone, television, computer, or combination of any of these), the trend is the same: people are becoming transfixed in front of an immobile object. With each technological object added to the human psyche, the

user generates an altered self, but this self is predicated very much on the drive towards viewership. Accumulation becomes a form of digging one's own grave: these devices cease to be windows so much as burrows away from reality, and, ultimately, into one's own immediate hell.

The question arises, then: if one can become so enmeshed in the digital world, trapped, which way is out? What happens when one enters and cannot escape the device? In the previous chapter, I discussed certain texts in which the dead populate the screen, but that allowed for the screen to serve as a portal between our world and the next. In *The America Play*, the screen allows for exit, the image moving outwards. I move now to texts in which this is a certain impossibility: the screen is not an openable window, but a clear yet solid wall. Thus, I focus this chapter primarily on two texts that examine the difficulty of the image exiting the console: Adult Swim's *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2000-2015) and Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian" (1951). Though disparate in terms of context and separated by almost 50 years, we see a very strong undercurrent that connects the two: the TV is an overwhelming device, a digital trap. Certainly the medium changes over time: the shift from black/white to color, from CRT to LCD, &c. Though the two texts do not depict the TV identically, such does not change the fact that the two texts, in spite of their distance in time, reveal an anxiety of a world consumed by the screen and the social consequences.

To begin with, I will examine *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (abbreviated *ATHF*) and return to Bradbury further below. The show, a staple of Adult Swim's late night programming, features three anthropomorphic food-shaped roommates. Respectively, they are Master Shake, a vindictive milkshake; Meatwad, a rolling ball of meat with the mind of a toddler; and Frylock, a hovering box of fries with a goatee and *Aqua Teen*'s voice of reason. As is expected for Adult Swim's æsthetic, *ATHF* favors episodic structure rather than linear plot. The surreal nature of the

show has, perhaps, lent to its cult following. Often, the show catalogues the deaths and tortures of the main characters repeatedly, adding much to the show's notorious sense of dark humor. For example, the show's "Video Ouija" episode opens with a somber Meatwad standing in the center of a pentagram, attempting to summon spirits[34] through the television console with the aid of an Atari game from which the episode derives its title. In an effort to appear on the screen and ultimately haunt (i.e. prank) Meatwad by coming out of the television as a ghastly spirit, Master Shake commits a violent suicide involving a mixture of sleeping pills, asphyxiation with car exhaust, electrocution, drowning, and piranhas ("Video Ouija"). What he doesn't realize is that this prank is entirely contingent on whether or not Meatwad is playing the game.

Realizing Meatwad's apathy towards the game and perhaps the intensity of Shake's absence, Frylock "plays" later, finding an 8-bit rendering of Shake on the screen standing in the TV, stuck in the space ("Video Ouija"). The situation becomes increasingly complicated as it fails to line up with Master Shake's sinister expectations. There is no hope for him to pass through the screen; he is irrevocably dead and damned to remain in this space. This particularly bizarre death and afterlife sequence serves as a model for this chapter: resurrection is redefined by the screen in general. However, my premise is not so much a matter of metaphysics at all. I am not concerned here with determining whether this is the soul in a metaphysical sense. Instead, I will treat this return as a displacement of body in an image: what we see of Master Shake on the screen, for the purposes of my argument, is his image or representation.

Why avoid the metaphysical treatment then? According to Jean Baudrillard, we are in "the era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own,

[34] My use of the word "spirit" in this case is not in the sense of a soul that is present, or an indication of the afterlife in any literal sense. My treatment of this word throughout my argument is similar to what one might expect around Halloween: an image. Decals on windows, effects in advertisements, &c., all simulate spirits, but they are nevertheless simply images, not actual souls. In a similar sense, the spirits that are made manifest in the Video Ouija game are images that appear on the screen. Any reanimation of the body is simulation, not soul.

no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance" (*Simulacra* 6).[35] First, his rejection of a theologically-based rendering of reality suggests that there is no intervention that determines the coordinates of reality. The reference to the Last Judgment of *The Book of Revelation* suggests, also, the nullity of a teleological direction expected in Christendom (below, I will discuss the implications of the digressive nature of *ATHF* that suggests a similar lack of *telos*). Second, the implication that there is no second coming of reality, so to speak, leaves everything subject to the definition of simulation. If everything is theoretically *dead and resurrected in advance* as Baudrillard suggests, then Shake's situation is not one of metaphysics, but rather of the order of simulation. The term "resurrection," then, is problematized in its normative sense: if everything– including the living– is dead, then resurrection as implied in the theological sense critiqued here is a moot point: death and resurrection are prerequisites of the simulation, so both have already happened. Thus, Shake on the screen is no more real (or unreal)[36] than off of it. His death by suicide is just another form of simulation by this definition,

[35] In yet another episode of *ATHF*, this very nature of simulation is replicated in (coincidentally) a ghost. In Season 7, Episode 11, "Kangarilla and the Magic Tarantula," the Aqua Teens are haunted by a spirit. When confronting the ghost towards the end of the episode, Frylock reveals that ghosts are killed by cell phones. In the presence of the ghost, neighbor Carl begins to make a call, and the signal causes the ghost to explode in a blast of purple ectoplasm. A moment later, the ghost reappears as "the ghost of the ghost" ("Kangarilla"). When he notes the cell phone, the scene repeats. Yet again, the spirit appears as "the ghost of the ghost of the ghost," the same blast of ectoplasm resulting ("Kangarilla"). The specter continues appearing in an endless loop, exploding repeatedly as Meatwad now dials the phone every time he approaches ("Kangarilla"). Such is the nature of Baudrillard's definition of simulation. It is infinite regression as the ghost becomes "the ghost […] of the ghost" where the ellipsis stands for an infinite addition of removes from the original ghost. Regardless of how far away the remove, the resurrected form is no different than the original. For all intents and purposes, barring the self-given title *ad infinitum* (*ad nauseam*), they are identical.

[36] Baudrillard also posits, in relation to a "God [who] himself can be simulated" (*Simulacra* 5), that the definition of the system of reality is reorganized: "Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (5-6). Criticizing the theological belief in a real God as an absolute referential to the Real, Baudrillard notes that the possibility that God "can be reduced to signs" (5) implies the death of all referentials: nothing is *not* simulacrum. Thus, the distinction between real and unreal is yet another arbitrary point and a null discussion. Baudrillard uses the terms here to explain the connection between simulation and the dissolution of reference to reality, reinforcing the idea that Shake is no less real on or off the screen.

and his resurrection is yet another: he is no more simulation than he was before, even though he appears in 8bit form now.

A similar redefinition of death comes with the first broadcast appearance of Master Shake (from which I draw the epigraph to this chapter), which echoes his later sentiments about death on/in the screen: lying supine at the end of the "Baffler Meal" episode of *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast*, he asks the question of where he ends up when he dies (part of the joke being that he is still alive on the now empty talk show set). Is he in heaven? Or is he trapped *in* television, forgoing the usual *on*? With his exaggerated speech throughout the episode, it is possible that this is just another quirk, but it still points to a noteworthy representation of the television console: one can be *in* television, physically or psychically contained within the device. I intend to examine this notion of context in which the television becomes not just a location, but a container of sorts. When the image cannot pass through the screen, it becomes encapsulated in the television much like a body might be placed in a mausoleum. Or, maybe, a better analogy would be a haunted house from which the damned cannot pass from this life to the next without psychic residue.

Like *The America Play*'s "echo"[37] discussed in the previous chapter, the image is a recurrence of the body. In the absence of the body, the memory persists indefinitely. For the sake of my argument, I will define memory as an image of something that once was, one that no longer has physical substance backing it. Memory is predicated on visual remembrance of occurrences as they happened, albeit recycled, modified, and filtered. The eyewitness cannot be completely trusted due to false memory and poor reconstructions for this very reason, but memory reconstructs body as an image and recontextualizes as a stand-in for the absent body. The new appearance, like the ghosts in infinite regression (see Footnote 35), indicates that the

[37] See Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play* in her collection *The America Play and Other Works*.

return of the image is defined by the nature of Baudrillard's simulacrum in that the new image (i.e. resurrection) is no less an image than the original. Although they are identical for all intents and purposes, there are times when the image changes, is modified through memory.

This does not counter the idea that the original and the new are the same. In fact, it indicates a new signification system that references the same thing. For example, in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the brain is the seat of a new form of visual mapping. Although fictional, Case's neurocyber navigation demonstrates a similar construction to the brain's capacity to access memory: like Master Shake on the screen, there is a displacement of material. Again, though, the historical context comes into question: how can these two texts relate over such a broad expanse of years? The technology which Gibson's novel is predicated on, though futuristic, is still very close to its context: Gibson anticipates future connections to the digital world, yet his screens are still very much understood from his 80s context. The technology is heavily different now, and there is still no true neural network like the one Case experiences. However, yet again, these two texts betray a continuity in thought: the digital medium is a method of remembrance. In both cases, the technology lends to new metaphors for discussing a circuitous memory that is still consistent with our time, albeit improved. For Gibson, one can look at the network as a series of wires and metaphors contained within a motherboard. It is a series of connections soldered together to provide a complex circuit. However, the reader is presented with grids from the first person perspective as Gibson describes precisely how Case perceives simulated space. Alternately, one might understand Case's navigation in cyberspace as a neurochemical process crossed and connected with the electronic apparatus. All three point to the same image, that is, all three methods of approaching the cyberspace that makes itself manifest in the not-at-all metaphorical confines of Case's skull signify the same space through

different terms. The same holds for Master Shake: image on the screen or as body before his suicide, both represent the same memory. The mind conjures an object without the object being there. Think of an incident three years ago, and it is before you while simultaneously absent: the body (i.e. matter) is gone; its image remains.

Even biologically, the body refuses to let go of an absent object visually. In his *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary states, “The retinal afterimage is perhaps the most important optical phenomenon discussed by Goethe in his chapter on physiological colors in the *Theory of Colours*” (*Techniques* 97). The significance of this theory, even though it is used to define a “new ‘objectivity’” rather than to problematize the notion of a stable reality (98), suggests the same premise of image as memory. Crary notes, “The colored circles that seem to float, undulate, and undergo a sequence of chromatic transformations [after one stares through the camera obscura and closes the aperture] have no correlative either within or without the dark room; as Goethe explains at length, they are ‘physiological’ colors belonging entirely to the body of the observer and are ‘the necessary conditions of vision’” (68). Goethe’s theory reflects the premise that when staring at an image for a significant moment (thus, exposing the retinas to the object for an extended period of time), the image appears as if it is still there when one’s eyes are shut. For Goethe, this signifies that the image and all of optics are predicated on/in the viewer.

The very notion of sight is caught up in a sense of viewership that recreates: to view is to project and contain “an image which now *belongs to the eye*” (Goethe qtd. in Crary, *Techniques* 69). The image lingers, is possessed by the eye, a memory as it was seen before the viewer. Again, this is the definition of memory I will use for the purposes of my argument: it is the image that resurfaces (or never quite leaves), even when the object to which it is connected is removed. The implications go further in the use of the alternate terms for afterimage, a “ghost

image." First, a ghost image can be an image that burns itself into a screen after prolonged exposure to a static scene.[38] As a memory made physical in the fissures of the brain, a ghost image is physically impressed on the screen. It surfaces and refuses to leave. Second, a ghost image can be, quite literally, any photograph of a ghost.[39] Although part of the pseudoscientific realm of parapsychology, the nature of such a ghost image is that the dead surface to communicate with the living through a photograph, which one might view as a pseudoscreen: a picture as a window into the past. In both of these cases, the residue refuses to fade even when the initial image is removed. The image becomes a memory physically manifested on the screen itself.

So memory is an image, and Shake is thus a memory that the screen contains. Though the phenomena of displacement in *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* lead to much humor in the episode, my intent here is not to discuss simply the comedic elements of the screen as a prison of the damned. These instances are novel, humorous even in some cases, but they are very important for our understanding of society's increasing dependence on and entrapment in technology. Memory may find extension in technology, but the risk of a cultural forgetfulness comes with it.[40] The more we displace memory from the biological to the digital, the more social reality is affected negatively. The rise in use of cellular devices, internet-based technologies, the intermixing of existing technologies, &c., correspond to severe rearrangements of public and private

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[38] Apple Support labels this phenomenon "image persistence." In a guide titled "Avoiding Image Persistence on Apple Displays," the support defines the ghost image as "a faint remnant of the image even after a new image replaces it" ("Avoiding Image") Other definitions include: "persistence," "image retention," and "ghosting" ("Avoiding Image"). Although this is one among many discussions of what a "ghost image" entails, the definition implies permanence. Importantly, note that the image is "faint" and refuses to completely pass. It lingers. The description is uncannily similar to the deceased who populate the screen.

[39] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists "spirit photography" under the definition for the word "spirit" (see definition g). The following listing appears for 1887, a good working definition: "Encycl. Brit. XXII. 405/2 'Spirit-photography,' or photographing of human and other forms invisible to all but specially endowed seers."

[40] The discussion of memory and digital storage is a lengthy conversation that extends far back with Vannevar Bush's proposed "memex" (discussed below in detail), but a more recent conversation on the potential value and simultaneous risk of digitized memory can be found in Amber Case's TED Talk titled "We Are All Cyborgs Now."

consciousness (if the fine line between them has not been blurred irrevocably by now). When the body ceases to type, view, absorb content, what remains? In the following pages, I will discuss the implications of viewership for not just body, but for image, especially when the latter remains after death. In these instances of the screen-mausoleum lie some radical implications for how our technophilic culture is moving towards imprisoning and encapsulating (or embalming and preserving?) itself while still living: the dead are not the ones whose heartbeats stop, but rather those who are transfixed to their screens in a petrified standstill.

Deteriorated Memory of the Haunted Screen

The concept of being caught in this stillness is a common phobia, and the fear of being buried alive is a common trope in horror. It seems natural then that, enframed by this mechanism and infuriated, Master Shake begs Frylock, "get me out of here; this place sucks ass" ("Video Ouija"). Essentially, he is trapped in an 8bit purgatory. Although we only get a brief glimpse of this hellish horrorscape (there is minimal time dedicated to Shake's entrapment of which we only get a two dimensional representation, a space which the episode never enters), we can assess that this is a space of psychological torture and misery that *sucks ass*. Surely Shake's vulgar language is common, but it indicates the misery he experiences in terms he is familiar with. Regardless of the passage of his voice from what lies beyond, Shake cannot leave. Nor can Frylock gain passage unless he too dies. Master Shake's imprisonment is rendered separate from living reality for two reasons: Shake cannot come back from the dead by means of his own, and Frylock can do nothing to remedy the situation either. Here, the solidity of that boundary entails absolutely no hope of escape. The screen is permeable to a minimal extent: audio. Even so, there is a reduction here as all vocal output originates from the Atari's connection to the screen. Again, the

viewer is never admitted into the hellish nightmare that Shake experiences. Shake’s image is mediated by the screen, and the horrors of “hell” are mediated as well. Reduction indeed. Like the function of the Greek chorus in tragedy, Shake presents what the viewer cannot see, explaining what is offscreen. Perhaps it is not the screen that does not allow him to relate more so much as his terribly abrasive personality, but the very nature of the fact that he has to convey the information to the viewer (Frylock and, by proxy, Adult Swim’s audience) signifies that behind the image presented is a chain of signification. Much like a GUI on a computer, Shake’s information is only the tip of the iceberg.

Because of this form of signification, implicit in this scene is the reduction of reality outside of the screen to a lower form: 8bit renderings on an Atari console. Consider the crudeness of the graphics in relation to more contemporary gaming and television devices. In this case, Shake’s body is transformed into code that is simultaneously on the cartridge and elsewhere: the video game brings to life the dead through the means of the screen. Consciousness and data are displaced in parallel motions. In the case of the former, Shake is on the screen, but his image must necessarily be in the cartridge: this is where any video game stores data – even if this is a supernatural game, it seems to abide by every other rule, the major one being that the console must be on and connected to the television. In the case of the latter, the same rules apply: the data is contained in the cartridge, but its representation only appears on the screen. Remember that even if the cartridge is necessary, the screen is more so: a console without a screen is unplayable and, thus, rendered useless. Summoning spirits embeds them in a digital discourse that their bodies were not originally configured for. The two stand in symbiotic relation to each other. Between the two is a string of codes that dictates what appears on the screen. Technically, even without the screen, the game is still functioning in real time: even if the

Atari is not connected to the screen, the program is still running. However, for the player, the connection must be made. The string of code runs regardless, but the screen makes it intelligible as a visual.

Coding, though, brings with it a slew of other considerations and problems, particularly in the form of signification. In chains of code, a small error can have massive ramifications. That which is signified becomes increasingly estranged from its signifier: code lies far beneath what one actually sees on the screen. Similar to this particular dislocation in *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (and in coding more generally), N. Katherine Hayles' theory and definition of "flickering signifiers" elaborates on the issues of digital signification and its susceptibility to error. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles expands upon Lacan's theory of signifiers by adding certain facets to a new form of signification for the posthuman era: "Intervening between what I see and what the computer reads are the machine code that correlates alphanumeric symbols with higher-level instructions determining how the symbols are to be manipulated, the processing program that mediates between these instructions and the commands I give the computer and so forth" (31). Where signifiers are stable (in so much as they refer to a specific signified), digital signification changes previous concepts of how a word or symbol signifies. To make the distinction, Hayles employs the analog/digital dichotomy to demonstrate the difference in how language actively codes meaning: "Precisely because the relation between signifier and signified at each of these levels is arbitrary, it can be changed with a single global command. If I am producing ink marks by manipulating movable type, changing the font requires changing each line of type" (31). Beginning with a typewriter, to change the text poses a problem in that one must physically change the typeface to change the appearance. There is permanence, to some extent, encoded in the analog model: to change appearance, one must manipulate the machine or

find another typewriter; to erase something previously typed, one either covers up or starts on a fresh sheet of paper (or continues with the error). The analog is, unsurprisingly, plagued very much by the problems of physicality and its unforgiving nature.

The digital, however, allows for much more mobility: “By contrast, if I am producing flickering signifiers on a video screen, changing the font is as easy as giving the system a single command. The longer the chain of codes, the more radical the transformations that can be effected” (31). The digital allows for instant modification with the click of a mouse or the swift typing of a code. Erasing and correction are instant, words appearing and disappearing with a sense of immediacy that the physical form of typing does not possess. But even more than simply ease, one must also examine where signification is grounded. If the nature of digital signification is as arbitrary as Hayles suggests, then there is no longer a simple signifier → signified relationship. Instead, the arrow in this model could be replaced indefinitely with a number of arrows, that is to say, that the arrow is replaced by the coding mechanisms of programming language, GUI, &c. As the reader examines the arrow that has been printed upon the page, the understanding is simple in the original relation: the signifier points symbolically to the object it signifies. However, in digital form, the arrow ceases to be exclusively an arrow. The → can be generated without one ever having to type any form of lines that would be required in print. One way the user is able to enter this without having to type it is through Microsoft Word’s “Symbols” button, where users can scroll down and select from a list of symbols. Through a series of button clicks, the arrow appears. Alternatively, the user can enter the alt code (ALT + 2192, in this case). In either circumstance, the arrow is produced, complicating the simple (loosely termed) relation of signifier to signified.

In relation to this form of typing, the fact that Shake appears in 8bit form, in this reduced matter, is similar to the change of the font in any given text as it relates to the signifier/signified model: the message itself remains the same, but the way it actively *means* changes. Shake's first image was his body: it was a composition of blood, skin, maybe plastic and paper as he is indeed a cup.[41] He was a living, carbon-based being. After his suicide, he emerges in a new context and, thus, a new form. Now on the screen, he is a coded image in an electric space. Nevertheless, the character in body and onscreen are the same. Much like the signification that is virtually identical between the hand-drawn arrow and the typed one, the image and the body signify the same Shake. Even so, one must consider some implicit differences in the signifiers and the possibility of loss that affects not only how we signify, but how we remember.

Consider not only the variability of coding, where one can reach the same results through different codes, but its fragility. One mistyped character in a string of code can result in a glitch. If image is inseparable from the definition of memory, the fragility of the way we signify must also pose severe consequences for the way we remember. If memory was once an instantaneous connection to the object (e.g. Goethe's model of the afterimage discussed above), it is now composed of a much longer chain of signifiers as Hayles suggests, and this poses severe complications. On his theory of memory loss due to technological increase in 24/7 capitalism, Crary states:

> Because loss is continually created, an atrophied memory ceases to recognize it as such [i.e. as 'ceaseless displacement and discarding']. The primary self-narration of one's life shifts in its fundamental composition. Instead of a formulaic sequence of places and events associated with family, work, and relationships, the

[41] Many episodes in the series involve Shake being mangled, dismembered, and so on. In each case, he bleeds. To some degree, then, even if he is a cup, he behaves in rules of the biological.

> main thread of one's life-story now is the electronic commodities and media services through which all experience has been filtered, recorded, or constructed. (*24/7* 58-59)

Is this not the very consequence of the longer chains of coding? The human mind is a series of synapses, but they are encoded in the body itself beyond conscious control. Outside of the body, such a system may well be chaos for the human psyche. With a myriad of new ways to remember, the human mind reels. Although discussing less the use of a television screen than general technologies and their influence on a degrading cultural and personal memory, Crary's suggestions have some uncanny connections to what we see in Master Shake's current predicament: his life (or life after death) is being filtered through the media he is so consumed with. In many episodes, Shake is situated in front of the television, consumed with the image and quite irritated at its interruption (more often than not leading to him pushing it over in a series of explosions). This seems, then, a natural consequence: in living, he was consumed by the TV's intrinsic mesmerism; in death, his memory is recomposed through the dominating apparatus he uses. The memory that is Shake filters its new consciousness through the TV: damned in life, damned in death. In terms of signification, the reduction of his body represents a decay. If the body is absent and cannot decay in the grave, it decays to some extent in this transfer to the screen. Although 8bit can construct recognizable objects, they are only crude representations and simplistic renderings at best. As a remembrance, Shake is the embodiment of the *atrophied memory* that Crary predicts. Perhaps this dramatic shift from earlier texts like *The America Play* is particularly due to the shifts in technology and the larger amount of information displaced in the screen.

The problem of a declining memory is not personal, though, meaning that Shake is not the only victim of it in the series. The very structure of *Aqua Teen* suggests a similar formation of consciousness that Crary suggests in this passage. In fact, any given episode follows a random trajectory with little to no explanation. Consciousness for the entirety of the show is fragmented, tangential, and often incoherent. This current episode, for example, does not end with Shake having been exorcised. After a series of asinine attempts on behalf of an African witch doctor wearing sneakers and knee-high socks, the episode ends with Frylock inadvertently summoning a giant chicken that kills the ill-fated neighbor Carl ("Video Ouija"). The structure of this series suggests another example of what Crary fears about technology: the mind is in a state of deterioration, and the idea of narrative is crumbling. Cause and effect are null in such a way that linearity is also dissolved. We are seeing the nature of an increasingly fragile memory as well. Within the series, each of these characters will meet a number of demises only to reappear in the next episode unscathed. Little to no continuity is established. Certainly, this case is not limited in terms of constructing narrative.

Shake's obsession with the TV in life is his personal hell in death, but there are greater ramifications for his predicament. His memory is decaying, but if this can happen to him through the apparatus, it is also symptomatic of a larger-scale problem. In a similar way, the nature of the sky in the opening sequence of Gibson's *Neuromancer* suggests this scale: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (Gibson 3). Why open a novel that has little to do with television (if at all), but, rather, with a series of internet networks, with this particular image? The two have definite connections as far as they both have screens in the context of the novel, and there is a heightened connection of the two in our current context, but the novel predominately focuses on internet connectivity, networking, and simulated space rather

than viewing. According to Michele White's *The Body and the Screen*, "The first sentence of Gibson's *Neuromancer* indicates that physical settings and screens will combine" (20). White notes the interconnection of the layers of reality in and outside of the screen blurring in the novel, suggesting that there is no distinction that separates the two. Similarly, Baudrillard himself calls the TV "the universal screen" (*Simulacra* 49), signifying the traumatic extent of scale. Expanding upon this, I would suggest that the narrative reveals something much more troubling. Rather than a blend, the screen-like nature of the sky indicates that the ultimate exteriority is the interiority of the screen. Further, the opening sequence indicates some haunting problems to be addressed: the narrative is set up in such a way that functioning in this world is equated to the passivity of viewing; if the sky is static, the world is a television set with nothing to watch; combining the former two, the implication is that people are still viewing. Strangely, these conditions describe the fan base of *Aqua Teen*. With narrative in decay outside the screen, the show uncannily resonates with this postmodern condition of existence. The color of static in *Neuromancer* furthers the monotony of the television, the world, the two sickly equated to the other. Years later, Shake's reappearance epitomizes this condition. There is no way out of the screen, and all is enveloped in this nausea of static.

Thus, surrounded by the confines of the screen, memory must be reorganized accordingly. What this demonstrates is the displacement of cultural memory from the home and human-to-human society to a disconnected simulation of connectivity that only vaguely replicates the real thing. Shake's position in front of the TV and subsequently in it are thus a new discourse that is very prevalent in this technophilic world. People begin to favor connectivity over connection, chatting over conversation. For example, in one of her TED talks entitled "Connected, but Alone?," Sherry Turkle notes her discussion with an 18-year-old. This young

man who obsessively text messages expresses his desire that "[s]omeday, someday, but certainly not now, [he'd] like to learn how to have a conversation" (TED). There is a subtle irony here. Texting is in fact a conversation, a means of communication. Still, there is deterioration and loss. Facial cues and body gestures are missing, sarcasm and other vocal tones are absent, and miscommunications and misspellings abound. It seems that the definition of the word "conversation" is what is at stake here. The boy defines "conversation" as face-to-face discussion involving all that is missing in text messaging. Even on the screen, Shake manages a conversation face-to-face with Frylock. His emotions of desperation and anger are facially present because the screen is an image in dialogue with a body (i.e. Frylock's). There is loss as discussed above, but the apparatus does not mean complete destruction of communication. It means redefinition.

In a discussion on digital dualism, the idea that "the digital and the physical [are] separate," Nathan Jurgenson suggests this redefinition of social connections on and offscreen ("Digital Dualism versus"). As Turkle posits, the screen has integrated itself into the human psyche as an extension of the self as well as of social reality on a larger scale. We communicate, write, edit, but what? Images, messages, ourselves. Social media in particular have changed how people interact at a distance, but also how people frame themselves. Each post or upload is directly connected to a construction of the self. However, Jurgenson suggests that "Turkle's outdated term 'second self' to describe our online presence" points at, beyond semantic play, the problem of defining onscreen/offscreen as real/simulated respectively ("Digital Dualism versus"). Instead, Jurgenson suggests "an alternative view that states that our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once" ("Digital Dualism versus"). Rather than a "second self," computer use is an integral part of the self, inseparable. Certainly

Turkle agrees, but Jurgenson takes issue with the terminology employed as it fosters the idea that once a user leaves the screen, that digital identity is lost to some degree. As demonstrated by *ATHF*, Shake is always himself, regardless of body or image. He is Shake, both on TV and off.

Emphasizing this dual (but by no means separate) existence, Jurgenson suggests that, as an example, "our Facebook pages are indeed 'real life' and our offline existence is increasingly virtual" ("Digital Dualism and the Fallacy"). The digital and the organic are very much intertwined. For example, a person might message a friend via Facebook, never seeing the friend's real face on the screen. The two set a meeting time and a place without having ever uttered a word, yet the two somehow manage to meet in the "real" world offscreen. Inversely, a server failure causes a message to never arrive, and the friend never shows. What happens on the screen can and does affect social reality. Thus, actions performed onscreen have real world consequences, and *vice versa*: Shake kills himself and finds himself resurrected on TV, Meatwad leaving the game unattended keeps Shake in a purgatorial space, and Frylock's conversation with the dead Shake connects the two realms. Again, the nature of communication is called into question due to this split: are the digital and "organic" realities truly separate? *ATHF* suggests that they aren't, pointing to a new definition of communication and social interaction that takes into account the permeation of the two.

Still, the limitation of calling this a problem of definition of a term is such that it neglects the larger reordering of the body. Yes, conversation is about bodies in direct relation to each other, but the very nature of this reordering poses horrifying consequences for the representation of oneself. One important aspect that Turkle points out is that "Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little,

not too much, just right" (TED). So what is at stake here, then, is not just the terminology, but the very representation of the self and the construction of image. The recent controversies in fashion over the use of Photoshop to airbrush bodies into perfection exemplify the issue here.[42] With new means to appropriation and modification, the image as a mirror reflects a fantasy rather than a reality. Still, as Jurgenson suggests above, the two are not completely separate. The original remains extant in the modification, much like a face remains unchanged physically under the touch of make-up, but the surface is rendered differently. Where surgery cuts into and alters the depth of the body to modify the surface, digital retouching means editing, which in turn spawns a new orientation of the body to be touched up, Photoshop being only the digital equivalent of plastic surgery. The fact remains that this is not just a physical but a psychic problem. Baudrillard himself notes the dilemma that arises from these alterations to the body, but even his rhetoric suggests the image is at risk:

> Everyone talks about alienation. But the worst alienation is not to be dispossessed by the other but to be dispossessed of the other, that is to say to have to produce the other in his absence, and thus to be continuously referred back to oneself and to one's image. If we are today condemned to our own image (condemned to cultivate our body, our look, our identity, and our desire), this is not because of an alienation, but because of the end of alienation and because of the virtual disappearance of the other, which is a much worse fatality. ("Plastic Surgery")

Thus, if body is reorganized, the very nature of cultural psychic alienation is displaced as well, nullifying the Other for Baudrillard. The Other becomes a product less than a projection. For

[42] One example of the problems with fashion and Photoshop is H&M's Lana Del Rey photoshoot. According to Jessica Misener of *The Huffington Post*, the ad is filled with "tell-tale idiosyncrasies," including: a deformed collarbone, a paradoxical position of Lana Del Rey's body in front and behind the car simultaneously, and a bizarrely shaped elbow (Misener). The result is a physical anomaly that cannot be reconstructed in reality, and the body becomes subject to impossible standards that some aim to replicate through surgery.

Baudrillard, the very physical construction of the Other through means of plastic surgery suggests that the body is a spliced image, and this voluntary alienation is the nullification of alienation itself. Our hell is that we are trapped in the image, says Baudrillard here. Because there is no Other, we make our own. This is a consequence of the lack of digital dualism. There is no degree of separation because onscreen and off are increasingly synonymous. Where Jurgenson sees the image as an editable self, Baudrillard sees the body as the new image. Jurgenson's theory does posit a direct correlation to who we are in life and who we are on social networking, but there is no direct physical consequence of editing a picture of the self for him. Even if there are psychological ramifications, the body and the image of the body are modified separately, though inherently linked according to Jurgenson. That is, the distinction between the two theories is not a separation of image and body so much as Baudrillard suggesting the next logical progression in digital editing: editing turned back against the material self. With the end of the Other in Baudrillard's theory, even the screen which serves as a boundary no longer cuts us off from the image: the body and the image are not connected; the body *is* the image. Though Jurgenson notes the real world implications of screen activity above, the distinction between image and body becomes nullified as the body itself is treated like an image. The self is modified not just through surgery, but through the screen: Photoshop, edited statuses on Facebook, "About Me" sections – each is a form of relating the self as a visual construct. Thus, the Other is no longer a natural difference so much as it is an artificial construct (comparatively – if everything is simulacrum, it is *all* artifice to some degree).

One can no longer be alienated, and Baudrillard appears to grow nostalgic here. The loss of alienation points to a lack of distinction that problematizes any relation to the screen as a separate space. Although talking on the level of skin and surgery, the plague for Baudrillard

reaches global levels: “Plastic surgery [la chirurgie esthetique] becomes universal” (“Plastic Surgery”). There is nothing that is not image, nothing that cannot be modified. Shake’s predicament, then, is a global problem. Shake is in a place that *sucks ass*, but is it any less accurate to extend the problem like Gibson’s *Neuromancer* does? If plastic surgery applies to the context itself, this is not a dermal limit. The universalization of such a problem radicalizes the way in which body image (quite literally) is constructed in relation to others. To have bigger breasts, to be skinnier, to be taller – the violence done to the body is allegedly a way to set oneself apart from the rest in the most literal sense. Nevertheless, a new hegemony renders these modifications futile: the very ubiquity of such procedures renders the new Other the very Same. The consequences for Baudrillard are extreme: cultural memory and consciousness of the Other and alienation are rendered null in the process.

Further, there is an inherent disconnect and reordering of means of communication and memory in these circumstances. Each of them is symptomatically related to the direct interference of the screen with the functions of living. Further, if the problem is universal as Baudrillard posits, then the fact remains that there is no longer exteriority (i.e. the screen is not a division between this reality and the image inside because *everything* is now contained in the screen). As an explanation of this lack of distinction, Baudrillard discusses the Lascaux caves and their simulation in immediate proximity:

> with the pretext of saving the original, one forbade visitors to enter the Lascaux caves, but an exact replica was constructed five hundred meters from it, so that everyone could see them (one glances through a peephole at the authentic cave, and then one visits the reconstituted whole). It is possible that the memory of the original grottoes is itself stamped in the mind of future generations, but from now

> on there is no longer any difference: the duplication suffices to render both artificial. (*Simulacra* 9)

One might argue that there is a difference between the two caves: people can only enter the simulation and view the real cave through the viewing gap. But the question arises of whether or not this truly matters, for gazing into the hole is almost synonymous with gazing into a mirror of the new cave. If entrance were permitted into the original cave, the same situation presents itself to the viewer. Baudrillard argues that it is this proximity that nullifies the original as such. This being the case, there is a similar phenomenon in Shake's predicament: the screen and what is off it are indistinguishable. Shake may be in 8bit form, but it is still his image on the screen (and off), regardless of the different appearances. They make manifest the same figure, and, due to the correlation of the two, the binary of onscreen/offscreen is no longer feasible. The TV image is the second cave, albeit the first (i.e. Shake's body) is absent. It is a rebuilding of the "original," the term a virtual fraud for Baudrillard. Like the regressive ghost of *ATHF*, Shake is the image of an image, this distinction virtually unnecessary to make. If the exterior Shake and interior Shake are rendered the same, then there must naturally be consequences for the viewer and the outside. What effects, then, are present when a viewer/user interacts with the screen? I turn now to examining the space of the TV, its light, its boundaries. The very artificiality of the image and its relation to the viewer, the reciprocal gaze of the cold light of the console, render the viewer no less an image.

Extensions of Memory in the Digital Mausoleum

The lament of Master Shake is not an insignificant one, and Baudrillard's theories of the screen point to the horrors of technology. However, the initial intent and the extensions provided

by the digital cannot be ignored in spite of the terror implicit in them. Even with these consequences, the benefits of the screen must be discussed. Although Shake experiences discomfort in the screen, one thing cannot be neglected: he is still able to communicate through it and, thus, be remembered even if his body has been eradicated. Though the world we live in is being modified by the screen, and there are definite problems of a mediated and deteriorated reality, the screen is a two-edged sword. With the advent of digital storage came an extension of human memory: not everything deteriorates. As an early example, Vannevar Bush's proposal for the design of a "memex" machine in his article "As We May Think" serves as a predecessor to computed thought and memory. The problem Bush aimed to counter is that "trails that are not frequently followed are prone to fade, items are not fully permanent, memory is transitive" (44). The memex would serve as "an enlarged intimate supplement to his [i.e. the user's] memory" (45). As an idea for the storage of data, the memex is a predecessor to the computer. For Bush, and certainly for the computers in use today, the screen itself serves as an extension of memory, a sense of displacing what is remembered. If there is loss, it is in the body, not the screen. Even if the screen is directly connected to the forms of decay discussed in the previous section, we must also consider what forms of extension it has allowed. If we forget, data is stored so that we can restore our memories, much like Shake reappears on the screen. Further, memory can be literalized, visualized, erected as a monument. If the dead populate the screen, then it only seems justified that they would have headstones and other forms of indication of their past presence.

One bizarre example discussed in Lisa Nakamura's *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* entails the simulated petrification of miscarried pregnancies in online message board signatures. Although very different from what we see in *ATHF*, the qualities of death as portrayed on the screen through these forums are a fitting way to understand Master Shake's

death and resurrection. Cataloguing a particular page on babydream.com, specifically a profile of a woman named Holly, Nakamura notes that "[t]he fragility of the ultrasound and the nursery as 'aspirational' and anticipatory signs of new motherhood is reinforced by the representations of two tiny cartoon angels with long hair, dresses, large pigeon-toed sneakers, and glittery wings, along with a small baby monkey wearing a blanket over its shoulders," each of these pictures corresponding to a particular miscarriage (149). Although this is a different medium than the television screen, there is nevertheless a sense of the uncanny that we see in Shake's return as well as the appearance of these miscarriages. The deceased return in friendly manifestation, simultaneously indicating their presence and absence: they are here on the screen while also nowhere to be found except in the grave. Like the Lascaux cave and its imitation or the returns of the Foundling Father in *The America Play*, the original and the new representation are flattened.

In Nakamura's discussion, we see another form of mediation that appears in Shake's imprisonment as well: sublimation – the deceased take on a new form. These cartoon angels and animals are surrogates and take on monumental significance rather than literal, much like a tombstone indicates where the person lies. Even so, the metaphor is fraught because the body lies beneath the tombstone. Again, a monument or memorial may be more appropriate, but even if we take this as our new metaphor, there is the problem of physicality. With the example of Holly's forum signature tag, we see a number of pictures that are meant to represent the prenatal deaths, but Nakamura also addresses a stunning reality: "These images of 'missed' children are never represented with ultrasounds, though it is almost certainly true that women have them, as many miscarriages are diagnosed in this way" (150). Instead of using the ultrasound of the children in the womb, mothers on this message board will opt instead for artificiality. They use many images like the ones on Holly's signature. Nakamura even examines the use as

“aspirational;” none of these images are of babies, but rather of young children somewhat grown. Though they may be angels, they are children angels, not infants. This phenomenon signifies a certain mentality that grieves in a way that remembers the children as they could have been instead of as they were.[43] Even in relation to demise, the pictures tend to be saccharine in character. The glittery quality, the cutesy animals, and the young angels all indicate some modicum of hope for the deceased, that they may have peace in the next life. Shake’s situation is no less aspirational: his picture on the screen “aspires” to be a surrogate body: it takes on the equivalent appearance and shape as it had in the living room. It aspires for the biological substance it lacks. In death, Master Shake mimics the construct of these message boards that Nakamura examines.

This begs the question, then: what is the next life? The screen or the afterlife? Or are they not necessarily mutually exclusive? According to Nakamura, “[i]t seems that the language of loss and bereavement around the matter of miscarriage – a pregnancy that produces an invisible result, or rather one that is never visualized in popular culture – must take the form of vernacular image production or graphical avatars” (150). The argument here is that it is only natural for this form of loss to be characterized in a spectacular way, taking the form of the “vernacular,” the tools available to represent. In this case, mothers who represent their deceased kin construct a reality through these images and represent the miscarriages through the screen in this way. In the case of Shake, he appears through the “vernacular” of Atari: coded being. The afterlife must, then, take the form of the context and medium through which it appears. Whether it is a

[43] The idea of the children being “as they were” is technically fraught with the problem of mediation (i.e. to see the fetus, one must use ultrasound). The children “as they were” are images as well. However, the distinction between ultrasound and online avatars is the representation of real bodies: a body must be present *in utero* for the ultrasound to produce an image; an avatar requires no such body to be present as it is a stand-in for another body.

sublimated representation of a deceased child or the peculiarity of *ATHF*, death is very present on the screen, and it finds itself respectively encoded by the device that is used to summon it.

Because death finds itself digitized, it finds form through the pixelated images that are staples of these technologies. Memory here is, then, filtered through the apparatus in such a way that the images not only draw together unconnected events (i.e. varying miscarriages, stillbirths, and actual births appear sometimes in juxtaposition), but are also symptomatic of the medium in which they are represented. Although Nakamura discusses online forums here, the principles nevertheless apply to Shake's conundrum of the Video Ouija game. First, the image of mourning (if it can be called such[44]) is that of a pixelated body rather than one with rounded edges. Blocky and 2-dimensional, Shake's body has been replaced with a surrogate, much like the miscarriages. It is *him* on the screen so much as his image is *him*. What is on the screen is in no way an indication of his body (remember that his body was destroyed in his suicide), but, rather, takes the place of it. Like the figures in the message boards, Shake stands as a pseudo-living monument: he is dead, yet antithetically alive. Nakamura and *ATHF* contrast to some degree, though, as Shake does speak to the living directly. The screen stands as a barrier for him, and he speaks outward. But what of the viewer who interacts with him? The fact that he does converse with the living redefines the way viewer and viewed stand in relation to one another. The light from the console may very well be drawing sight inwards, the TV a metaphorical eye that perceives in its own right.

Moreover, this convention interrogates the purpose of the screen. One might say the very nature of the context (i.e. a forum) is to share the grief in hopes of coping with a community at

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[44] After being told Shake is dead, Meatwad simply responds, "That's cool" ("Video Ouija"). As Shake plays the antagonist much of the time, Meatwad remains less than impressed by the implications of his death.

large. However, another strange phenomenon arises. Nakamura's examination of this website in particular demonstrates that the mothers'

> visual style is crowded, chaotic, and based on a principle of accretion rather than integration. There are significant clashes in styles and textures between images on the same signature, especially when compared to the orderly ACSII sigs of the text-only days of the early-nineties Internet. These are riotous combinations of bumpers, animated GIFs, blinkies, photos, borders, cartoons, and other combinations of text and image. (153)

The images pile up as if they are forgotten rather than ordered. Nakamura's examples of Holly (148) and Tattie (151) likewise exemplify the numerous pictures and web-based graphics that accumulate on these tags, which in some cases exceed the actual messages of the forum posts. In this case, the screen becomes a cluttered mausoleum, a monument piled not necessarily with trash, but with an undue and overbearing number of memories that may or may not necessarily relate. What results is a disparate patchwork that stacks on top of itself, clashes in color and theme, &c. The digital afterlife is crowded with memories that are both remembered and forgotten. Rather than edit and condense, the users have a tendency to leave the pictures as they are in a paradoxically ordered disorder. The mourning process allows for the acceptance of death to some extent, but the memories must not be erased or modified: they must be left *as they were*.

In yet another connection to Nakamura's theory, there is a sense of accumulation in the images that end up on the screen in playing Video Ouija. No solitary voice emanates from the screen. At the onset of the episode, a stereotypical sheet ghost speaks to Meatwad. The indication is that the game is complete artifice. Although Atari met with commercial success, it is not

remembered for having detailed graphics – its iconic simplicity is what stands out. The ghost, then, is appropriate to the medium, whether it is fake or real. However, the ghost communicates with Meatwad directly as Shake does later with Frylock. Meatwad asks a question about how the ghost's sister's baby is doing, to which the ghost replies, "She's dead. We're all dead." ("Video Ouija"). The direct response is indicative of the reality of the game. The images on the screen have external reality, but they nevertheless appear as Nakamura describes: jumbled together almost to the point of senselessness. Thus, if the screen becomes a grave, it is not very well managed. The ivy isn't overrunning the graveyard; the gravedigger is placing the graves together closely where they can fit in this oddly shaped plot of land.

Shake himself is subject to this "burial." Next to him is a presumably dead infant, sobbing and contributing to the hellish nightmare of frustration that he experiences ("Video Ouija"). The placement of this dead baby is a symptom of incongruity detailed by Nakamura. There is the occasional human figure outside of the house in the *ATHF* series, most notably the disgruntled neighbor Carl, but the figure of a human baby next to Shake is a strange juxtaposition. This is further heightened by the appearance of the stereotypical sheet ghost that Meatwad speaks with: there is no consistency in who or what appears in relation to gameplay. Like the pages collated and curated by Tattie and Holly, the screen is a collection of disparate images that are meant to represent the previously living, things that were otherwise off the screen before their reemergence. Further, the presence of the purplish baby in the limbo that is the screen begets an odd and unsettling comparison between *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and Lisa Nakamura's discussion of babydream.com: the baby on the screen in either text correlates to a real world death. Although the images appear artificial, they signify something that has happened, something outside of the screen.

Television and the Lit Window: On the Outside Looking In

When we see Master Shake trapped in the television console experiencing his own purgatorial nightmare, we see a reflection of the nightmare before us. Borrowing the concept from *Arkwright's Cotton Mills by Night*, by Joseph Wright of Derby**,** Crary reimagines the painting in relation to a building filled with the light from a number of television screens: "One can imagine a pairing of Wright's painting, each of its factory windows illuminated by the oil lamps that allowed work to proceed continuously, with a mid-twentieth-century image of a not dissimilar multi-story building with windows lit by the glow of television sets" (*24/7* 79). Where Wright's painting for Crary is a symbol signifying the onset of 24/7 capitalism, the building illuminated by TV is practically synonymous in form. He notes the connection between the two, a "transformational relation between a deployment of light sources and the social construction of time" (79). In both cases, the light is deemed as extraneous and unnatural, yet it is directly tied to the conception of daylight. Now that light is accessible 24/7, the day/night binary is virtually null indoors. Such has consequences for the reordering of human consciousness and the circadian rhythm. Crary's primary focus is the effect of capitalism on sleep, but this comes with other psychological ramifications. With night and day flattened by perpetual light, viewership is eternal.

Crary's description is uncannily replicated years before in the form of Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian." As a means to further illuminate the situation at hand for Master Shake, I focus now extensively on this parallel text. Implicit in this story that anticipates the horror of entrapment in the screen is a similar reordering of cultural consciousness in relation to the television. This 1951 sci-fi horror tale notes a disturbing trend that Bradbury anticipated as the ultimate disconnect between all humankind. As Mr. Leonard Mead walks down the city streets at

night in the year 2053, "he would see the cottages and homes with their dark windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows" (Bradbury, "The Pedestrian" 600). Mr. Mead's walk suggests a dull approach to the cityscape, something of the minimal. Here, we have the first implication of what is happening that prevents people from leaving their domiciles: a flickering of light that must necessarily correlate to that of the television screen shifting between scenes of a number of television shows. A similar visual appears with Meatwad standing before the screen. The opening of the episode seems analogous to what Mead watches but only sees at a remove: a viewer in front of the TV, the primary light source for the screen filling a darkened room. Certainly a coincidence that these two texts bear this similarity, but it seems appropriate that even in the later of the two, the TV is portrayed in conjunction with the dead as a medium through which the deceased are summoned.

Moreover, we see something that puts Bradbury in contrast with *ATHF*: where the Adult Swim show relies on the TV as a visual itself in episode, Bradbury as a writer relies heavily on pure exposition. However, the difference is not purely a matter of description. For Bradbury, the TV is very present, but it is simultaneously marked by an absence. The descriptions above point to Mr. Mead viewing the secondary effects of television, namely the *flickers behind the windows* rather than a direct image. He sees nothing of the screen itself, and the object is missing from his frame of reference. Nevertheless, the same horror produced in *ATHF* is made manifest in this absence: the screen consumes the social perception of those in proximity to it. Mr. Mead's inability to see a screen marks him as particularly extraneous to this culture as all others appear to be watching television in their homes as he wanders the city by night. The domestic becomes ghastly as Leonard's estrangement from the interior becomes pronounced: he is watching rather

than viewing, and he sees very little in these descriptions. Bradbury's exposition, again, focuses more on secondary effects rather than the object itself. Where we see part of Shake's digital hell in *ATHF*, we never get a true glimpse inside the homes that Mead passes, and Bradbury's descriptions emphasize a tomb-like emptiness.

The eeriness of the scene is heightened by the lack of external population: Mr. Mead is the sole pedestrian wandering the streets of the city. His observation heightened by this solitude, he notes that "[s]udden gray phantoms seem to manifest upon inner room walls where a curtain was still updrawn against the night, or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a tomb-like building was still open" (600). Much like the situation of the television console in *ATHF* as a space of haunting, what were simply buildings before are equated to tombs, living mausoleums. The lights from behind the window are spectral, transient, but nevertheless bear some sense of distanced presence (i.e. each light signifies an absorbed viewer in relation to what Bradbury views as a lifeless screen). Even the passivity of the bodies that Mr. Mead sees implies that the people lack any form of agency other than the gaze. Even so, they appear immersed in gray light, consumed and absorbed in the material they are watching. Only distant sound emanates from the TV. The voices are vague, barely impressions, that Mead hears from a distance. Any indication of presence is minimal, any sign of life virtually null.

As he wanders these streets, Mead speculates the TV line-up: "Eight-thirty P.M.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?" (601). Note the implicit question here: what show is broadcasting? However, Leonard does not ask what is on the TV, but rather, "What is it now?" (601). What *is* it now? His question seems to suggest some weight to the image, that is, a lack of distinction between it and reality. The image become present. The reality become absent along with the screen Mr. Mead never sees directly. Again,

we have a connection between the violence of television metaphorically speaking with that of the psychic damage it causes. A *dozen assorted murders* open the set rather than a specific program or genre. First, we have the idea that the viewers are party to the crime as witnesses to this scheduled catastrophe, which stands in contrast to the previously discussed text *Eat Cake*. In the case of the play, the Woman was the victim; for Bradbury, the viewer is the victimizer. The viewer is thus complicit in the crime. Second, we have a number of murders rather than a singular death, implying a larger scale of damage. There is a death drive for Bradbury's fictional viewer that runs parallel to that of Master Shake: the screen consumes and is inherently tied to death. The viewer obsesses over death in both cases, Shake taking it to a shocking extreme.

The act of watching, then, becomes an obsessive detriment. As Crary continues, "we allow the management of our bodies, our ideas, our entertainment, and all our imaginary needs to be externally imposed" (*24/7* 60). Everything is increasingly mediated as far as the television functions, including actions and responses. The compulsion to watch is paired with two others: the desire to remain immersed in the artificiality of the image or the imitation of what happens in the screen. For the viewers in Leonard Mead's city, the murders are metaphorically replicated in the action of viewing: the citizens act as if dead, victim to the television screen. If not physically, they are socially dead in that their interactions are rendered extraneous by the need and desire to view. For Shake, on the other hand, is action. The desire to imitate the ghosts that talk to Meatwad from the screen transfigures itself into suicide for entrance into death rather than an escape from life. Because he sees the ghosts, he incurs the desire to haunt. In both cases, the screen determines the social coordinates for the viewers: how they behave, how they desire.

These simulated deaths on- and offscreen are reminiscent of Baudrillard's theory surrounding the hologram in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard notes:

> The TV studio transforms you into holographic characters: one has the impression of being materialized in space by the light of projectors, like translucid characters who pass through the masses (that of millions of TV viewers) exactly as your real hand passes through the unreal hologram without encountering any resistance – but not without consequences: having passed through the hologram has rendered your hand unreal as well. (*Simulacra* 105)

According to this theory, the viewer is no more real than the simulation projected on the screen. Engaging with the image alters any conception of reality as the Real: the TV engulfs the viewers. By proxy, the viewer is projected *at*, *upon* – what is seen is projected through one screen (TV) and onto another (body). The sense of the separation of mechanism and viewer is null.

Like the riddle about the tree that falls in the forest with no one to hear it, is a TV truly functional without its viewer? Baudrillard's own descriptions of the TV betray his disgust with it: the TV is an object "which suggests nothing, which mesmerizes, which itself is nothing but a screen, not even that: a miniaturized terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head – you are the screen, and the TV watches you" (51). His inversion of the viewer-viewed relationship complicates matters. The viewer is viewing an object that reciprocates the gaze and renders null the initial viewing; the spectator is the victim of the gaze rather than the TV and is rendered (or reinforced as) an image. Shake's repositioning as a video game "character" is unsurprising as he was very much a viewer prior to his death. Constantly watching, he is watched by the TV in turn. According to this model, viewer and viewed can be inverted, so technically Shake's position has not changed because the two are exactly the same. This complicates the nature of viewership as a whole: where does the screen actually stop? As discussed above,

interiority is rendered exterior by the screen. Baudrillard's negativity, then, seems a natural apprehension of what the TV is capable of, namely violence against the body.

Even so, this is not his most negative descriptor. Favoring an analogy to the Holocaust, Baudrillard labels the TV "its perpetuation in another guise, this time no longer under the auspices of a site of annihilation, but of a medium of deterrence" (50). These descriptions of the TV as a crematorium or gas chamber are not surprising in the way that these writers describe it. The body in repose might well be the body at final rest. Baudrillard's suspicions of and revulsion with the television stem primarily from this analogy. The harshness of this comparison is a result of cultural loss: "Forgetting extermination is part of extermination, because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the social, etc. […] One no longer makes Jews pass through the crematorium or the gas chamber, but through the sound track and image track, through the universal screen and the microprocessor" (49). A controversial claim to make, no doubt, but Baudrillard's harshness does in fact capture the danger of the hapless viewer. Scale is a recurring issue for him, namely that the problems posed in the TV (and in plastic surgery above) are universally applied as "[f]orgetting, annihilation, finally achieves its aesthetic dimension in this way – it is achieved in retro, finally elevated to a mass level" (49). Again, the television's ubiquitous and ominous presence globally makes it a force that the viewer cannot escape. The metaphor of the Holocaust, though, is predicated on the forgetfulness symptomatic of viewership. Note in *ATHF* the disparate images on the TV, the dead forgotten and recreated in the cold light of the console. The figures other than Master Shake bear no emotional or referential significance for the Aqua Teens. They are images of the forgotten. Further, Leonard Mead's distant neighbors sit in the room, forgetting, immersed in the light from the console.

They sit inert as if already dead, lost to their context. There are no lines to the crematorium anymore, only chairs to be occupied.

Another problem of the television is that it renders cultural memory invalid. Baudrillard laments the “artificial memory” that takes the place of forgetting (49). The Holocaust is not denied by this premise, but Baudrillard fears that its residual is fading. The approach to the Holocaust is changing over time, and its cultural placement and remembrance are as well. In another episode of *ATHF*, “Der Inflatable Fuhrer,” the Holocaust itself is parodied by proxy through the reincarnation of Adolph Hitler as a balloon. His emergence as a balloon resulted from his attempt to hide his possessions anally, filling himself until he quite literally bursts. Popped like a balloon, he comes back as such (“Der Inflatable Fuhrer”). For Baudrillard, cultural memory is a “balloon” Holocaust. He does not deny its occurrence, but he does note the cultural loss implicit in its return. The rise of historiographic metafiction is a betrayal of this loss: as Monique Wittig writes in *Les Guérillères*, "But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent” (33). Remembrance is fraught, and what is left is invention.

Such misremembrance is a trope of shows on Adult Swim, especially in relation to the Holocaust and 9/11. *Family Guy* parodies the Holocaust through time travel episodes (“Road to Germany”). *American Dad!* blames 9/11 on witches, going so far as to suggest answers to a conspiracy on a fictional www.ItWasWitches.com (“Jenny Frömdabloc”). Even *Robot Chicken* suggests an Anne Frank film in which Hillary Duff plays the girl, inverting the story: Anne Frank survives using crafty tactics to trick and prank the Nazis (“Toy Meets Girl”). This constant irreverence is a means to examine these traumatic historical events in lighter terms, and it points to the extermination that Baudrillard fears is inevitable: parody is to some extent a loss of the original. For Baudrillard, because of these constructed memories, the Holocaust is no longer a

lived experience. This is not to deny the psychic residue, but the way it is perceived in cultural memory has been heavily dictated by televised mediation. The image on the screen is a decay of the original: Shake is in 8bit, the viewers in Bradbury are less dynamic than the images they watch, the Holocaust has become a parody in this case. The broadcast becomes social death.

Again, the issue of scale must be examined. If there is cultural loss, what of the sizeable context that is generated by viewership? Returning to "The Pedestrian," Leonard Mead, as an outsider, describes these haunting scenes in passing. Again, he can only speculate what is on the screen inside; he has no "viewing screen" in his own home (Bradbury, "The Pedestrian" 602). Clearly familiar with the program content, he seems to describe each glowing light of these houses as a scene in which *something* is happening. The TV content becomes, in a sense, the social real. Regardless of whether or not he is a viewer, he is viewing by proxy. The story indicates earlier traffic rushes during the day as people commute to work (601). Social construction is dichotomized, then, into production and passive consumption. On the other hand, Master Shake inverts this model by entering the screen. As an object to be watched that returns the gaze, viewership is problematized. He is active within the limits of his context, unable to act much more than speak, and even so, he is incapable of the necessary agency to free himself.

As far as Mead and Shake are concerned, there is no escaping the social placement as viewer. In his text "The Context of the Concept," Charles Russell argues that Postmodernism recognizes the importance of context in such a way "that as a language, art cannot be considered separately from cultural languages in general. It is to recognize that no matter how hermetic it may declare itself to be, any particular meaning system in society takes its place amongst – and receives social validation from – the total pattern of semiotic systems that structure society" (187). According to Russell, art and its constructs, regardless of how personal they may be, are

caught inextricably in a specific context. It is part of a larger scope in which it must be understood. For Bradbury, Mead stands in a context that, although he resents its passivity, he is nevertheless a part of. Just as the *homo sacer*[45] is part of society only by his exclusion from it, Mead is part of *the total pattern of semiotic systems that structure society* by his self-isolation and refusal to be a television viewer. Further, the crux of the postmodern world stands as a problem not of a lack of meaninglessness or nihilism. On the contrary: Russell states, "recent art presents us with the fact that the world, if anything, is too meaningful, that the work is unavoidably *connected* to the world" (188). As much as one may aim to be excluded, there is no escape as one is framed by one's interactions with the context. Meaning is dictated by objects' and thoughts' relations to other objects and thoughts in their respective contextual spheres.

In Bradbury's story, one either follows the social norm or is unwillingly immersed in it: there is no true escape from the context as it is very much a part of one's psychological framework: As Russell writes, "Whatever is perceived, known, described, or presented in art or experience is already charged with meaning by the conceptual patterns governing the artist's orientation and cultural recognition" (188). Thus, Leonard Mead's responses to the city in which he lives, even as he acts to the contrary, are *coded* by the very context he lives in. His reaction against the context nevertheless requires him to take part to some extent in the selfsame context. In this way, viewership dominates the city; even his negation is a form of viewership. In a concise version, Don DeLillo writes, "you are the sum total of your data" (141). There is a nauseating connection between oneself and the context in which one lives that confines and constricts. As much as one wants to escape, there is no escape. Further, the implication of DeLillo's quote is that the body can be reduced to its essential components, namely as a coded being. Both Mead and Shake are enmeshed in this form of context. Whether Shake is off the

[45] See Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the eponymous term in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

screen or on it, he is constituted by coding: DNA in body, and programming languages in digital form. Either way, one could look at the constitution of self and materiality as a form of connecting a number of "flickering signifiers" determined by one's social sphere. After all, DNA and programming are both chains of code. Likewise, as much as Leonard Mead resents his society, he is a body encoded by its mores, even if he disowns them.

Similar to Master Shake's predicament on the screen and Mead's entrapment in the city, a recent Adult Swim commercial focuses on a claymation séance in which a group of three stand (two women and a priest) in a room, all in black and white. One of the women places a TV on the table, the other turns it on, and the three join hands. Ghastly wisps fly out of the top of the TV as the priest's eyes begin to bleed, these ghostly figures flying above the heads of the three to form a phrase: [adult swim]. The unsettling tone is further enhanced by the organ music that culminates into a droning synth and the sounds of a blowing wind (AS IDS). It may appear that there is escape from the TV: where Shake cannot exit, these ghosts (or whatever they may be) fly out of the top of the console. However, the commercial culminates by revealing that the séance takes place in a larger TV floating in an eerie abyss (AS IDS). In a way, this suggests the inescapability of the screen on the same level that Shake experiences there is no true escape from the box. Taking meta to another remove, the viewer watching this commercial places the larger TV of the commercial in yet another larger box, growing on a macro scale. If we take Gibson's description as a way of reading the sky as a screen, the world becomes one more TV in the scope of the commercial. What I aim to demonstrate here is that the commercial works *ad infinitum* as well, positing an inescapability beyond the level of Charles Russell's theory. One is not simply perpetually molded by a context; one is contained in layer upon layer of context. The commercial further demonstrates that beyond death, one is nevertheless part of the context: the ghosts leave

the smallest TV, but they are always in a TV, signifying that any and all possible contexts are arranged and organized by the monolithic screen, including Shake's and Mead's. In a context dominated by viewership, one's position in society is always dictated by one's relationship to the TV.

With this inescapability comes an extreme malaise made manifest in unresponsive bodies. The disengagement that comes with the television is its very horror that determines the coordinates in which the viewer acts (or remains passive, truly). What makes the television as a trap that much more unnerving is the inactivity of the device. Where a smart phone or a computer entails a paradoxically active passivity, the television viewer remains engaged without moving. Even more disturbing than this, Crary's vision of the television screen is much more unsettling than simple passivity: "However, television posed the unusual phenomenon of an addictiveness to something that failed to deliver the most basic reward of a habit-forming substance: that is, it provides not even a temporary heightened sense of well-being or pleasure, or a gratifying if brief fall into insensate numbness" (*24/7* 87). The TV viewer is simply a bystander with nothing but images to stare at. Consider the positioning of the viewer from a remove. What does a viewer look like? Stand behind the TV and watch the viewer: it seems an alien experience from this standpoint as the viewer stares absently ahead, chuckles or gasps from time to time.

Bradbury must have himself thought of a similar situation of watching the viewer (in the active sense). In his story "The Concrete Mixer," Bradbury employs an alien in two senses of the word: a Martian named Ettil travels to Earth only to become increasingly alienated by the humans' complacent lifestyles, their carefree (if not insipid) friendliness. This story resonates with "The Pedestrian" as well as *ATHF* and provides further commentary necessary to understand the position of the body in both. Among many disturbances, Ettil finds himself

disgusted with the concept of passive viewing. In a letter to his wife Tylla back home on Mars, he writes, “There are blond robots with pink rubber bodies, real, but somehow unreal, alive but somehow automatic in all responses, living in caves all of their lives. Their derrières are incredible in girth. Their eyes are fixed and motionless from an endless time of staring at picture screens. The only muscles they have occur in their jaws from their ceaseless chewing of gum” (Bradbury, “The Concrete Mixer” 150). Bradbury’s contempt for the screen here reveals his attempt to step away, behind the screen, to watch from a vantage point. Ettil’s observations reveal and decry several issues behind the Earth citizens’ viewership. First, his description of the people (primarily the women throughout the story) of the town is flat, that is, a painted hegemony. *All* of them are blond and white. They fit a certain generic mold. The implication that their bodies are *rubber* hints at a sense of production, that any one of these creatures is as useful (or useless) as any other.

What is important to understand here is that the body becomes a model not of humanity, but of consumerism and artificiality. Like the Woman in Jean-Claude van Itallie’s *Eat Cake*, these people are framed entirely in terms of passive consumption. Only after excessive weight gain, perhaps, does one realize the impact of this passivity on the body – but only after the fact. What this advantageous “Martian” perspective demonstrates to alien eyes is that the viewer is too daft to perceive, too unaware of surroundings to understand the consequences that arise in constant viewership. There is a detachment and absolute numbing of the senses. In lieu of “rush or charge of sensation of any kind” from watching TV in particular, Crary notes “a slow shift into a vacancy from which one finds it difficult to disengage” (*24/7* 87). Entertainment is reward to some degree, but what do the general masses have to show for it after the fact? Lost time, insomnia, dependence on the medium. It is no wonder that Crary deems this device a “neutral

void" (87). The phenomenon that is viewership becomes akin to lying in one's own coffin: absolute estrangement from the surrounding world. Understandably, Shake's tomb is the TV he was so absorbed with in life. He is lost in the void without any possible return. In the cases of Bradbury and *ATHF*, the television is directly connected to the grave, and the viewer occupies a grave as well.

Moreover, there are some physical and mental consequences in staring at a viewing screen. Although not equating the screen to death as do Leonard Mead and Master Shake, Ettil understands a similar sense of remove: dark, cold, vapid interior. From sitting so long, the people's rear ends are growing fatter and fatter, and their minds are consumed, reduced only to base functions that keep them alive: mastication and viewing go side by side as a common trope. Let us not forget the function of the lobby in the cinemas. Is it any coincidence that the song "Let's All Go to the Lobby" (1953)[46] was traditionally portrayed as sung by delicious foods and drinks one could procure before the film or during intermission? I pose the question in a different way: is it any coincidence that *ATHF* is about fast food watching TV? Is this not the height and the very source of nausea spawned by production? In this case, the consumer is consumption embodied: the consumer is consumed while consuming in a complicated reciprocal relationship. Ettil notes the problem of American (or earthling) viewership, and it seems to be this very disturbing trend in passivity related to the docility and obesity of bodies placed in front of a screen. Shake's anxiety, though, is in the inverse: that of becoming the viewed. To be viewed is, again, to be consumed. The shift from Bradbury's anxiety to that of *ATHF* about 50 years later reveals a shift in the way viewership functions today. It has become much more intense, and the loss has grown to become that much more severe than even Bradbury anticipated. Certainly Crary's position on viewership as the new citizenship holds, but the very structure of viewership

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[46] This famous song and film sequence can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40cT6I21JV4

becomes muddled as the gaze is not just inward towards the TV anymore, but also outward. The only damnation worse than eternal passivity in front of a screen is eternal activity in it.

Because of the shift in viewership and this new hell, mental absence begins to take on the social importance that physical presence used to: “Television quickly redefined what constituted membership in society. Even the pretense of valuing education and civic participation dwindled, as citizenship was supplanted by viewership” (Crary, *24/7* 79).[47] It logically follows, then, that Leonard Mead would be arrested at the end of “The Pedestrian.” If viewership is the new form of citizenry, then he has become alien to his own society. He is an observer, not a viewer. Thus, the term *pedestrian* becomes synonymous with *deviant*, *criminal*, *terrorist* even as Mead no longer fits in the standard social stratum because he does not consume or produce according to the standards set by the city in which he lives. When questioned about his profession, Leonard Mead notes that he is something of a writer, which is immediately discarded as “No profession” by the police car interrogating him (Bradbury, “The Pedestrian” 602). Readership is not viewership, and thus is also not synonymous with citizenship. Similarly, what makes Ettil so alien in relation to Earth’s society is less his status as Martian than his lack of desire to (dis)engage with the screen. His Martian genealogy allows for novelty and, thus, capital. Thus, we can read Master Shake through this lens: commodity and viewership go hand in hand. It is not insignificant that his first network appearance on *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* positions him as a talking advertisement for a new chain of restaurants, explaining all the deals and specials (TheBrakAttack). Here, we see living commodity at its height: the advertisement lives, and novelty is bound up in viewership. In

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[47] I would like to note the rising (though not necessarily new) trend of mediated societal relationships through the screen. For example, note programs like QVC that allow for shopping from home, Trinity Broadcasting Network and other such stations that allow viewers to tune into religious sermons from a distance, programs like *Dora the Explorer* and the late 80’s *Muzzy* that allow children to learn new languages without an instructor. Clerk, pastor/priest, and teacher (and parent!) are virtually absent in this model as the television fosters relationless relationships, so to speak.

all three of these texts, consumption is at the heart of citizenship: to be a part of the norm, one must consume and view. Social reality is not just determined but absolutely defined for the masses by this nightmarish device: Mead is a prisoner, Ettil an alien, Shake a victim to the gaze. If this behavior persists, if parody renders cultural memory a virtual hoax, if the TV is the new hell, what is the fitting punishment? What is the new damnation that is defined by one's relationship to the screen? Pain is a commonality in these texts, the television serving as a new form of punishment. Those using this form of technology risk a similar living death and a familiar retribution for their obsessive behaviors. The devices we are all too familiar with risk imprisoning us with their use, and, as Master Shake asks of an empty *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* set, are *we* in heaven? Or are we in television? Or are we in hell, only too unaware to notice it with our noses pressed to the glass?

Chapter Four

The Flickering Screen:

Differance, Flickering Signifiers, and

the Fleeting Digital World of Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

"Only code, she reminds herself."
~Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (355)

"[E]ven though information provides the basis for much of contemporary U.S. society, it has been constructed never to be present in itself."
~N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (25)

The trend of representing death on the screen continues into the 21st century with new iterations. As a turn from my previous chapters, I will now examine the screen as a web-based device. With the prominence of both web and broadcast technologies combined, it is perhaps useful to consider how the issues that have been appearing in the television screen similarly appear in the computer screen, especially in Internet connections. In his most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*, Thomas Pynchon unsurprisingly explores the idea of an underground network yet again. Reminiscent of his early *The Crying of Lot 49*, this newest book emphasizes the possible liberating qualities of the Internet at the end of the dot com bubble in the early 2000s. The rise of the web becomes most pronounced with the advent of the Deep Web, a territory that is still subject to urban legends and a digital mythology of its own.[48] Stories have surfaced of drug trades, deviant pornography, hitmen-for-hire, and even bizarre human experiments – some of which have been confirmed. The problem with these stories is that there is mixed information:

[48] Although Pynchon's depictions of the Deep Web are novel, he takes some clear creative liberties in his portrayal of the program DeepArcher, which will be discussed extensively in the following pages. The Deep Web, though accurately described as having "[n]o way for surface crawlers to get there, not to mention the encryption and the strange redirects—" (*BE* 10), does not necessarily equate to better technology than the rest of the web. Accessing the Deep Web does require a special program (specifically, one called Tor) and some insight (i.e. knowledge of the specific .onion domain name one desires to find), but all accounts of the Deep Web suggest that it is simply an extension of the surface web. I note this as it is important to dispel the misrepresentation of the Deep Web as more than it is; it does not extend to virtual reality as the novel suggests. Nevertheless, I will be examining the depiction of DeepArcher as it is presented; Pynchon is clearly up to something.

while there are some news articles that chronicle FBI takedowns of illegal activity that has been uncovered in the Deep Web, some tales verge on the fantastic and enter the realm of urban legend. Because of the remove of the Deep Web and its more esoteric use, verification of these stories is often difficult, if not completely impossible. Screen captures and stories are usually all a user has to go on to confirm whether or not some of these sites exist. Along the lines of this instability of the web, *Bleeding Edge* capitalizes on the fleeting world of the Deep Web to problematize how we perceive presence: if one can neither confirm nor deny the existence of a website, for example, does it actually exist? It may, but only within the rumors that surround it and the hearsay that spreads online, but the ontological status of a given website becomes difficult if there is only speculative evidence surrounding it.

In the previous chapters, the authors discussed tend to displace presence and question the placement of the body. Pynchon has a habit of eschewing presence altogether. As is common with most Pynchon texts, *Bleeding Edge* focuses on this problem of presence and absence and how these may be defined. Setting up a common crux of his novels, the two are elusive terms, but they nevertheless recur throughout his oeuvre. For example, Tyrone Slothrop of *Gravity's Rainbow* dissolves by the end of the novel: "Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own. If so, there's no telling which of the Zone's present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering" (Pynchon, *GR* 757). Slothrop's plurality emphasizes the difficulty of pinning down a singular being, suggesting that absence and presence run parallel: where Slothrop is, his other *personae* are not. His person is decentralized and now wanders, an apt analogy for the Internet. One has multiple profiles, many bookmarks, a series of signatures and accounts that identify oneself – but never on a singular site. Instead, a person as defined by one's activity online is a collection of nodes rather than a singular body. Even though

Slothrop wanders in these various persons, he can be said to exist (and not) in each one of these fragmentary bodies. Similarly, in *Against the Day*, Pynchon focuses on the luminiferous aether, especially regarding its importance to the Michelson-Morley Experiment. In particular, O. D. Chandrasekhar's response to the failed experiment in which the Æther is found not to exist determines that "this null result may as easily be read as *proving the existence* of the Æther. Nothing is there, yet light travels. The absence of a light-bearing medium is the emptiness of what my religion calls *akasa*, which is the ground or basis of all that we imagine 'exists'" (*AtD* 63). In this paradoxical case, absence generates presence directly as nothing spawns something. Even so, O. D. Chandrasekhar's theory suggests that existence is rooted in illusion. As will be discussed below, the Internet is to some degree a comparable non-space, only a simulation of depth and connection that can be reduced to fickle coding.

The examples of plurality and (non)entity continue throughout the years of Thomas Pynchon's authorship well into *Bleeding Edge*. Although plot is elusive in any given Pynchon novel, this text focuses on protagonist Maxine Tarnow, unlicensed fraud investigator, who is commissioned to investigate a series of odd numbers in the financial documentation of a company called hashslingrz. This suspicious organization, run by business mogul Gabriel Ice, may or may not have connections to the destruction of the 9/11 attacks. In seeking an answer, Maxine is met with a number of mysterious tangents that ultimately prove answerless. Among her investigations, Maxine's encounters with her friend Vyrva's husband Justin and his partner Lucas lead her to the programmed world of DeepArcher, a Deep Web game (for lack of a better word) in which hackers can develop the space to their liking. In the process, and among a myriad of characters of the Pynchonian universe, Maxine also meets two distinct men: Lester Traipse and Andrew Windust. The former, who has worked for hashslingrz, is murdered, presumably for

his indiscreet theft of money from Ice's industries. The latter, a possible government agent, attempts to persuade Maxine to provide information on her brother-in-law's possible connections to illegal hacking activity, but Windust dies as well. Ultimately, these two return as ghosts in the machine, quite literally. Where the problem of presence/absence becomes particularly difficult is in the Deep Web. Maxine finds herself interacting with (and, perhaps, inside) the immersive framework of a digital world known as DeepArcher repeatedly throughout the course of the novel. Early on, DeepArcher is described as "really just another maze, only invisible," a place where the user is constantly "dowsing for transparent links each measuring one pixel by one, each link vanishing and relocating as soon as it's clicked on… an invisible self-recoding pathway, no chance of retracing it" (*BE* 79). Maxine, curious of how to get out, asks coder Lucas how to do so. He replies, "Click your heels three times, and… no wait, that's something else" (79). Labyrinthine in scope, DeepArcher is described as almost having objectives, not unlike a video game. Still, Lucas' response centers on a crux: what is outside? How does one ever leave? Although realistically one could step away from the computer screen, the suggestion is puzzling. Pynchon, who has referenced *The Wizard of Oz* previously,[49] problematizes the notion of an outside to any given system. Consider the elusive collective *They* that appears repeatedly through the years of his writing, indicating a system that is inescapable and/or a conspiratorial group that seems to have its sight trained vigilantly on *their* victim. Nevertheless, his depiction of DeepArcher seems comparably optimistic.

Albeit the game (or whatever it might be, as it never becomes perfectly clear)[50] poses complications for Maxine, DeepArcher is consistently viewed as an almost cosmic space. For example, David Cowart argues in his article "'Down on the Barroom Floor of History':

[49] *Gravity's Rainbow* 283: "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore…. / –DOROTHY, arriving in Oz."
[50] Although DeepArcher's purpose is not entirely clear, I will refer to it as a game as it has several components that suggest this model: avatars, goals to find links, customization, &c.

Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*" that "DeepArcher puns on 'departure' and 'deep archer,' the one a dream of lighting out for the digital territory, the other something more Apollonian. Both meanings signify the dream of a redemptive spiritual removal" (Cowart). The nature of DeepArcher is one of escape from the surface, the plague that haunts Postmodernism. Even so, what would normally be considered nothing but a program is elevated to the level of spirituality and transformation, almost like an exit from the samsara cycle, a more positive rendition of the situation in *ATHF* discussed above. In Cowart's analysis, we see the nature of the game: a refuge for the soul.

Because of the consistent metaphysical analogs as well as these poignant descriptions of DeepArcher as something of an almost religious and revelatory experience, what I propose to examine in this chapter is, again, death on the screen. Pynchon's depiction is another manifestation that runs along the lines of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and "The Pedestrian," which I have discussed in depth in the previous chapter, yet it suggests another take on the problem of presence: what is present, if anything, in the always already fleeting digital world? Coding is less stable than written communication as glitches can be introduced into the system unintentionally at any time. With every rewriting of a string of code comes the risk of something lingering that may affect the program negatively, a ghost in sense. Pynchon literalizes this anxiety in the forms of the deceased populating the screen. With the bodies accounted for, the question arises as to what appears on the screen when dead men keep showing their faces (or avatars) after their deaths.

First, I will examine the deconstruction of the idea of presence in the world of DeepArcher. The nature of digital space denies a stable notion of being, making it difficult to assess what truly happens in the program. Every time Maxine logs in, the image before her is

something different: can DeepArcher, then, be said to exist if it is never the same space? Second, I will turn to absence, most prominently in the deaths of Nicholas Windust and Lester Traipse, residual from our world entering into the digital space. But, if the men are dead in this world, how can they speak in DeepArcher? Or is it them at all? Pynchon appears to emphasize absence as an alternative to presence, but not as any sort of solution to how we may define these terms. In conjunction with discussions of this binary, Jacques Derrida's term *differance*, a play on words meant to demonstrate the implausibility of *being* as such, will suffice to explain the nature of DeepArcher as a space in which the binary is perpetually under scrutiny. Finally, the very nature of coding itself renders these questions even more problematic. Using N. Katherine Hayles' idea of "flickering signifiers" and her expansion upon Derrida's deconstruction of presence, I aim to demonstrate that whatever appears on the screen is always already mediated and ultimately never present nor absent. Further expanding upon the ideas established in the texts previously examined, I will argue that *Bleeding Edge* poses a problem for how we perceive stable connections to others through digital media, especially in destabilizing the preconceived notion that we can indeed be present – in either "meatspace" or DeepArcher, or possibly both simultaneously.

Presence (DeepArcher)

Although Pynchon tends to be well-covered ground in the academic community, *Bleeding Edge* is still new to scholarly discourse and, thus, not thoroughly discussed other than in a few critical texts. Most of the material that does engage with the work is a collection of magazine and newspaper reviews, many of which cover the text loosely, providing a cursory summary as well as often inaccurately transcribing the title as *The Bleeding Edge*. Some of these

texts offer analysis and explication, such as Michael Jarvis' "Thomas Pynchon Attacks the Internet" in *Salon*. Jarvis argues, "The novel's take on cyberspace and its potential for alternative forms of social organization and anarchic community is both familiar and surprising. In each of his works, Pynchon has explored the idea of removing the self, the family, or the subcultural unit from systems of capital-C Control, most often identified as some form of military, economic, and/or religious metanarrative" (Jarvis). Again, we have the standard Pynchonian anxieties: Late Capitalism, grids of power distribution, and the ever-present underground that only surfaces occasionally. This suggests that the Deep Web is somehow outside of the reaches of the grid, outside of Capitalism and Control. Perhaps somewhat optimistic as even the Deep Web is subject to commerce (albeit illegal),[51] Jarvis does note the particularly important aspects of the underground nature of DeepArcher: it is subversive as it denies the surface access, denies dominant culture entrance. It stands on the margins of the digital world. Within this digital frontier, the grid[52] is still present. It still relies on the same apparatuses that the surface web does: one can only connect through a series of links, even if it is disorganized and labyrinthine. A maze may introduce chaos, but it is nevertheless structured. Further, if the FBI can launch investigations and detain criminals and infiltrate various rings of illicit activity in the Deep Web, there is organization. *Under the table* is not synonymous with *off the grid*.

Even so, Jarvis' analysis of the liberating qualities of DeepArcher poses a problem for what we define as present in this space: "DeepArcher becomes a domain through which

[51] One might consider the Deep Web a haven away from the Internet that perpetually aims to make the user a consumer. However, even if the Deep Web permits users into recesses of digital exclusivity, it may be worth noting that much of what happens circulates just below the surface of Capitalism. For example, the sale of illicit goods and services functions through cryptocurrency, a surrogate for real currency. However, perhaps there is subversion: when one can purchase fake IDs and other peoples' credit card numbers (again, even if illegal), maybe the system turns against itself: Capitalism thrust into its own face.

[52] By this, I do not mean to imply a literal grid as in texts like William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, whose conception is quadrant-based. Rather, I mean to suggest a high level of infrastructure that is still present within the system, one that allows for the surface to find paths into the Deep Web. Essentially, although the Deep Web is cryptic, there is still coded structure to an extent.

characters can exceed the boundaries of what is possible in both 'meatspace' and reality itself" (Jarvis). Even if DeepArcher and the Deep Web allow for an escape from the surface and permit a lack of clear boundary, the question must be asked: if this system surpasses *reality itself*, what is beyond reality? If reality contains everything that *is* (fraught verb that it may be), what is beyond this? It is possible that the statement exaggerates the qualities of the program, but an ontological crisis brews in these currents. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in the "Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, "That something *is*, presupposes that *anything* can be" (xiv), an underlying problem of both texts. What I propose to investigate in this section is the problem of presence demonstrated by the system of DeepArcher itself. Superseding reality entails a rupture: what does it mean to be outside of being?

What may fill this space (metaphorically speaking, as *fill* implies presence, antithetical to what I am about to discuss) is what Derrida calls *differance*. Derrida employs this linguistic game, a created term, to "provisionally give the name *differance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of its *a*, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, *both* as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation" ("Differance," 225). The swapping out of the *e* for the *a* (i.e. *difference* becomes *differance*) is intentionally confusing in the original French when spoken, subverting the privilege of speech for that of the written text in this case, as both *e* and *a* sound identical in the context. Only when reading the transcript of this lecture can one make the distinction between the French *difference* (*avec e*) and the neologistic *differance* (*avec a*). With this, Derrida sets up the deconstruction of presence. Because the phonetic distinction is lost, "remains purely graphic" because "it is not heard" (226), Derrida proposes a strategic subversion of language and meaning here.

Summarily, Derrida explains the particular usefulness for dismantling the privilege of presence in Western metaphysics. First, "Differance can no longer be understood according to the concept of 'sign,' which has always been taken to mean the representation of a presence and has been constituted in a system (of thought or language) determined on the basis of and in view of presence" (230). Because representing or signifying calls the object into being, *differance* stands outside of the scope of representation altogether. Bringing forth *differance* would defeat the purpose of the philosophical game at hand as Derrida seeks to convey linguistically the implications of something that stands outside of presence and absence completely. Because the *a* is for all intents and purposes identical to the *e* verbally, the term cannot exist: in a sense, it is simultaneously there and not. It is the Slothropian body/bodies wandering where the other/s is/are not. With this term, Derrida demonstrates that the binary cannot hold.

Further distancing signification and gesture from any sort of presence, Derrida writes, "Everything in language is substitute, and this concept of substitutes precedes the opposition of nature and culture: the supplement can equally well be natural (gesture) as artificial (speech)" (*Of Grammatology* 235). Though he focuses here on verbal and bodily forms of communication rather than written, the idea that each method is a *substitute* for something else indicates again that the idea of presence is fraught. Gesture may be closer to the original, to the idea or the elusive thing itself, but the very nature of gesture is still surrogacy. Take for example using gesture in place of speech: without words, explain to someone that you need the light turned on. You might point at the lamp in the room and mimic flipping a switch or a light coming on. Regardless, the miming itself only indicates the desire or the action, but it is obviously not the light itself. Even taking it a step further, you might proffer an apple to someone and they accept it. Even the giving of the apple is not itself presenting the apple *per se*; you have only signaled

your intent and signified possession. As Derrida writes, “The first consequence to be drawn from this is that the signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts” (230). The signified is never brought forth by the signifier. To speak is not to call the thing into being, but only to refer to the idea of the thing itself. Even so, the signifier is only one in a list of signifiers that refer, yet again, to other signifiers indefinitely. Language *never* gets to the thing itself.

Pynchon himself seems ever concerned with this sort of trace, places where language is marked by its own failure to signify. Many examples can be cited in which the author lists residue that hints at a previous presence. For example, he describes a scene as follows:

> They sit there side by side, mutually invisible, the partition between inscribed in marker pen, eye pencil, lipstick later rubbed at and smeared by way of commentary, gusting across the wall in failing red shadows, phone numbers with antiquated prefixes, cars for sale, announcements of love lost, found, or wished for, racial grievances, unreadable remarks in Cyrillic, Arabic, Chinese, a web of symbols, a travel brochure for night voyages Maxine has not yet thought about making. (Pynchon, *BE* 85)

Every single linguistic code here is a trace of something or someone past; the signified, in this case, may no longer exist. In a way, we are seeing coding spill over into the real world. Certainly these symbols could all be read through the standard signifier:signified lens, but Pynchon plays with the juxtaposition of data and reality: aren’t each of these instances links to other lives, to other places, that have to be uncovered like the mysterious and esoteric links in the digital

journey of DeepArcher? Pynchon's theme of entropy[53] is as prominent as ever. The emphasis here is decay: *rubbed*, *smeared*, *failing*, *antiquated*, *lost*, *unreadable*. Each of these indicates that the signification system is in disrepair. Perhaps our language is no less fragile than coded ones.

Although coding is much more complicated in its strings and is subject to failure as N. Katherine Hayles posits in *How We Became Posthuman*, written language itself is at times equally prone to miscommunication and "glitches" that prohibit functionality and understanding. Hayles presents an example in which she sends a theoretical email to her students only for the message to be corrupted into an indecipherable jumble, which "indicate[s] that for real-life communication situations, pattern exists in dynamic tension with the random intrusions of noise" (*HWBP* 31, 32). Further, she uses an example of conflating titles: "Or I may have gotten distracted thinking about DeLillo halfway through the message, so that although I meant to assign Calvino for the first week, the message comes out, 'If on a winter's night a white noise'" (32). Both examples serve to demonstrate the disruptions of what Hayles calls "noise" into a given system. Note that one is purely digital and one mental. Thus, coding isn't the only thing affected by noise. Lexical systems are prone to overlap and decay as the writings on the wall above fade into oblivion: they signify, but they no longer signify what they were intended to. Thus, the coding system fails, and the trace is not even connected to the original as it isn't recoverable, at least in the case of the writings on the wall. Even before entering digital space, Hayles and Derrida alike demonstrate the fragility of language and presence. If the signification system is broken in this way, then what consequences are there for the signified?

Addressing a similar concern, Derrida writes, "In this way we question the authority of presence or its simple symmetrical contrary, absence or lack. We thus interrogate the limit that

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[53] The concept is a recurring theme throughout his oeuvre, most obvious in his short story "Entropy" from his early collection *Slow Learner* (1984).

has always constrained us, that always constrains us – we who inhabit a language and a system of thought – to form the sense of being in general as presence or absence, in the categories of being or beingness" ("Differance" 230). The purpose of the term *differance*, then, is to examine what may lie between the two polar opposites of ontology (or outside of them completely). Instead of taking the sign for granted as any indication of presence, Derrida questions the possibility. Responding directly to Derrida, Hayles argues that "[a]s writing yields to flickering signifiers underwritten by binary digits, the narrator becomes not so much a scribe as a cyborg authorized to access the relevant codes. The progression suggests that the dialectic between absence and presence came clearly into focus with the advent of deconstruction because it was already being displaced as a cultural presupposition by randomness and pattern" (*HWBP* 43-44). Here, we have an amplification of the crux suggested by Derrida concerning the binary opposition of presence and absence: where Derrida emphasizes a contrast in writing and speech, Hayles adds to the mix digital writing and coding. The importance of this addition appears in Hayles' use of the word *underwritten*, suggesting that behind digital writing is more writing, code functioning behind the scenes. Where Derrida sees the sign as disconnected from presence, Hayles similarly suggests that this is particularly pronounced in cyberspace. Further, she emphasizes "randomness and pattern" as a new binary that is supplanting "absence and presence," or at least one that is shifting the coordinates of the terms. In both cases, the idea is that language, writing, and any coding system are not equivalent to presence.

Because of this inability of language to get to the thing itself within Derrida's theory as well as Hayles', a new category opens up, one that generally isn't used in the binary nature of previous strains of philosophical logic. DeepArcher, rather than being, seems to constitute a perpetually shifting world, dynamic rather than static. Even early indications in the novel suggest

progress rather than stasis. Like *differance*, it can be named and given a linguistic term (else we couldn't represent *differance* on the page). However, Derrida also points to the risk of true definition and being: "Any exposition would expose it to disappearing as a disappearance. It would risk appearing, thus disappearing" ("Differance" 227). Although we can use the term *differance* as a signifier for the philosophical problem Derrida presents, we cannot actually call it forth or present it because doing so would thus obliterate it by definition. It is outside of being and not, a space between. DeepArcher refuses such stasis as well, and because of this, Maxine is generally at a loss as to what she is encountering. Perhaps this is precisely because of the "randomness and pattern" interfering with "absence and presence" as suggested by Hayles. The fragility of the coded space directly correlates to the number of people hacking it. The more people entering code, the more idiosyncratic it will appear. Like the hell of *ATHF* that was composed of various forms of incongruent graphics, or the mismatched forum tags discussed by Lisa Nakamura, the space is overwhelmed by added code. However, these examples function on a smaller, more local level than in DeepArcher. These two are purely additions rather than modifications where DeepArcher's changes tend to be more global. With the intrusion of new coding ("pattern" in this case as code functions along a certain organizational language), DeepArcher is coded with a modicum of structure. However, the superfluity of pattern becomes randomness; the more patterns overlaid on top of each other, the more likely the structure is to deteriorate due to a lack of coherence. Rather than acknowledging DeepArcher as a singular form, it becomes difficult to pin it down as it is perpetually shifting because of the high level of linguistic noise in the form of coding.

Perhaps the medium itself is given over to *differance* altogether then. To emphasize the fragile nature of digital space, N. Katherine Hayles advocates a new way of understanding

signification in the era of computation. Her phrase "flickering signifiers" denotes the instability of any coded representation: "Intervening between what I see and what the computer reads are the machine code that correlates alphanumeric symbols with binary digits, the compiler language that correlates these symbols with higher-level instructions determining how the symbols are to be manipulated, the processing program that mediates between these instructions and the commands I give the computer, and so forth" (*HWBP* 31). Rather than a straightforward (loosely speaking) signifier:signified relationship, coding represents a signifier:signifier(repeating):signified relationship, where the code is run through a series of different computer languages to produce the ultimate signified. An image on a screen is simultaneously the signified image, the source code behind it, any corresponding metadata, &c., whereas an image on a wall is simply an image. As hacker Eric Outfield mentions to Maxine about a missing documentarian Reg Despard, "it's all dangling links anymore" (Pynchon, *BE* 239). Connections are lost, links are construed, and coding falls apart. The inevitable decline in communication is contingent upon the weakness of some of these links in the chain of signification.

Because the signification becomes a long chain rather than a single link, the possibility for disruption grows exponentially. Consider the telephone game in which people pass one sentence across the room from one person to the next. The message becomes increasingly distorted as something like "I sent an email" becomes "My aunt is in jail." Between each communication is the potential risk of misinterpretation. Because of this finicky quality, coding can often remove trace completely: scratch a line from a program, and suddenly you have eliminated an entire portion of a digital world. However, if one line of one hundred remains by accident in the wipe, glitches and bugs may be introduced into the system. Unintentional

intrusions happen from time to time, demonstrating this complicated method of signification. Where erasing a word in a paper letter does not damage anything but the integrity of the message communicated, or may result in eraser tears and ink blots, erasing code can change the inherent structure of the whole. But, even more horrifying, is the fact that the coded world is unstable and can be wiped out completely if done correctly, as if nothing was there to begin with.

Further suggesting that each iteration of DeepArcher is wiped out in that it is never the same, Maxine asks, "This DeepArcher, Vyrva, it's what – a place?" (37). Vyrva responds, "It's a journey" (37). The implication here is that DeepArcher cannot be pinned down in location, that it is the *act* of moving through space rather than the space itself. Or rather than the act, it is the potential of the act. Derrida elaborates on the ending suffix of *differance* as regards its relation to (or distance from) presence:

> But while bringing us closer to the infinitive and active core of differing, "differance" with an *a* neutralizes what the infinitive denotes as simply active, in the same way that "parlance" does not signify the simple fact of speaking, of speaking to or being spoken to. Nor is resonance the act of resonating. Here in the usage of our language we must consider that the ending -*ance* is undecided between active and passive. And we shall see [...] that it announces or rather recalls something like the middle voice, that it speaks of an operation which is not an operation. ("Differance" 229)

As regards the nature of *differance*, Derrida argues a space between active and passive and, by proxy, presence and absence. In examining the neutrality of action in the suffix -*ance*, Derrida demonstrates that there is another category often overlooked that shatters this binary logic. The example of resonance is thus the suspended animation of resonating. Where resonating denotes

the action, resonance is simply the capacity or potential to resonate. Within the bell is the ability to resonate, is resonance, but that does not mean it is constantly resonating.

If we expand this ideological approach to DeepArcher as a space, it may be useful to think of it as this middle voice, neither necessarily present nor absent, but containing the potential to be something else. Again, the program seems to be in a process of *becoming* rather than *being*.[54] Along these lines, Maxine returns and "can't help noticing this time how different the place is. What was once a train depot is now a Jetsons-era spaceport with all wacky angles, jagged towers in the distance, lenticular enclosures up on stilts, saucer traffic coming and going up in the neon sky. Yuppified duty-free shops, some for offshore brands she doesn't recognize even the font they're written in" (Pynchon, *BE* 354). Albeit the space is described in absolute terms in that Maxine sees an intensely specific setting, it is constantly reordered with each visit. One may look at this Jetsons-looking program and posit that it *is* DeepArcher, that the program is static. However, with the variability of coding and the fact that Maxine never seems to return to the same place, even though she is certainly logging into the same program, DeepArcher more aptly lines up with *differance* as occupying the middle voice. On the one hand, we might take DeepArcher as a space rather than a place, one in which coding changes the appearance but not the actual framework of the system. The distinction between these two is that a space is open to be filled where a place is a set location with qualities that are static. However, there is no guarantee that the frame itself isn't subject to change.

Consider the nature of independent games, for example. They may begin in small chunks, allowing the user to explore a limited portion of the digital world. As the developers gain more

[54] I borrow this concept from Friedrich Nietzsche, his usage being particularly prominent in Postmodern theory. Even Justin, one of the programmers of DeepArcher, says, "We wanted stillness but not paralysis" (Pynchon, *BE* 75). Is this not an image of Nietzschean *becoming*? It is a slow process, slow enough to give the illusion of being, but it isn't completely stopped. Flux has entered the equation, and change is inevitable with movement.

funding, the infrastructure begins to grow, more options become available, &c. The nature of the game may be the same, but the frame expands with each new development. However, DeepArcher denies such certainty: how can we know if the frame is the same if every time Maxine approaches it, not only the appearance but the actual coded space seems to change? One might reason that the game simply places Maxine at different spawn points, but nowhere in the course of the novel is this idea emphasized. Instead, the descriptions hinge on novelty, as if the world were rewritten in its entirety each time. The idea here, then, is that DeepArcher is not present due to the fact that it never *is*. By this, I mean to argue that there is no coded version of the verb *to be*. The verb itself implies a static nature, something that *is* consistently recognizable or contains certain traits that remain constant even when other aspects change. However, DeepArcher as a space may also fluctuate, and coding itself is much more susceptible to modifications: each string of code that is rewritten reshapes not just the appearance but the actual world of the game, and thus its entire ontology. Or denies it. Derrida posits that "[n]ot only is there no realm of differance, but differance is even the subversion of every realm" ("Differance," 236). Perhaps it is best to treat DeepArcher as a non-space altogether: rather than being a *realm*, it (like *differance*) undermines *every realm*. It is a protean beast that refuses definition, morphing once it is defined and, thus, refusing definition altogether.

Because DeepArcher continually morphs, it is hard to determine if it is actually there. Within the system, presence is eschewed in favor of chaos and change. Further subverting the idea of presence, N. Katherine Hayles suggests breaking down the dichotomy by presenting direct links not just between presence and absence, but between these terms and randomness and pattern. As discussed above, this new binary is one that disrupts the original, the one deconstructed by Derrida. However, Hayles also provides charts that connect each of these terms

as a means to explain how the binary is not as polar as previously believed. On the purpose of this "semiotic square," Hayles writes, "Out of the interplay between and among terms on the primary and secondary axes, more dialectics can be produced, which in turn produce further dialectics, and so on indefinitely" (*HWBP* 248-9). In each step, she amplifies the square to explore spaces between the terms on these pages. Again, her mapping of these terms responds to the similar problem presented by Derrida, whose primary "dialectic" (to borrow Hayles' use of the term) is *differance*. Hayles adds further terms between presence, absence, randomness, and pattern. Among the resulting new forms are "disruption," "replication," "materiality," "mutation," "information," and "hyperreality" (248-9). What these terms demonstrate, then, is that presence and absence are not static terms or identities. As Derrida critiques these terms with the use of *differance*, Hayles further breaks apart the binary to open new liminal (non)spaces that are subject to transformation themselves. Perhaps Derrida's *differance* is a singular iteration of the semiotic square. After all, every new dialectic presents a different set of rules and understandings of language and *being*. Concerning the nature of DeepArcher, it would appear that this coded domain is a digital equivalent of the semiotic square. Between the original code and newly introduced code from hackers, there is a synthesis of the two that is neither pole from the binary of old:new code. Instead, the space fuses the two into something altogether different. In this way, several of the terms appear in the transition from one stage to another in the appearance of the space: "information" and "mutation" are especially prominent in DeepArcher. Again, it is as if, rather than being, it is in a state of *becoming*, mutant code that will continue to (d)evolve.

Ironically, for such an elusive world, DeepArcher does have some qualities that contribute to an experience akin to virtual reality. The irony here is that if DeepArcher cannot *be*

in a proper ontological sense, how can the material presented seem so real at times, enough so for Maxine to conflate reality proper and the game in which she becomes enmeshed? In his review titled “The Thomas Pynchon Novel for the Edward Snowden Era,” Nathaniel Rich of *The Atlantic* argues that the reader of the novel also runs the course of DeepArcher: “Novels can pull off a trick that nonfiction cannot replicate: they allow us not only to consider an idea in elaborate detail, but to inhabit an idea, to follow it through to its most extreme conclusions. To *live* it. Pynchon achieves this effect most viscerally in scenes where Maxine visits a virtual world called DeepArcher.” (Rich). Maybe Rich is overemphasizing the capacity of the novel to transport the reader to a new world, but the suggestion of lived experience is integral to how Maxine perceives DeepArcher. It is as if she is actually there, actually within the coded world, as Pynchon’s descriptions repeatedly portray the program as almost screenless. The screen ceases to be a barrier as it was in the texts discussed in my previous chapters, now becoming an extension, as if there is no distinction whatsoever between onscreen and off.

Maxine’s initial encounter with DeepArcher is characterized as approaching what may be called a cosmic void:

> A splash screen comes on, in shadow-modulated 265-color daylight, no titles, no music. A tall figure, dressed in black, could be either sex, long hair pulled back with a silver clip, The Archer, has journeyed to the edge of a great abyss. Down the road behind, in forced perspective, recede the sunlit distances of the surface world, wild country, farmland, suburbs, expressways, misted city towers. The rest of the screen is claimed by the abyss – far from an absence, it is a darkness pulsing with whatever light was before light was invented. (Pynchon, *BE* 74-75)

The cursory description starts with emphasizing the screen, but this shifts quickly into an image of depth. Although Pynchon mentions *forced perspective*, the program becomes increasingly immersive in its visual qualities. In the image is depth, contrary to the qualities of a computer screen. Generally speaking, even looking at a picture of a given space on a computer, one is aware of looking at a monitor. Using a computer does not transport the person so literally to another country. However, Pynchon's description of this digital space borders on the qualities of virtual reality: the lack of distinction between simulation and real life.

The screen returns only to be swallowed by the darkness, but for Pynchon, this blackness signifies something *there*, even if it is vacant and reminiscent of the conditions of the Big Bang or Creation. The comparison to the origin of light, and presumably the origin of all that came after, presented in the text, the *abyss*, connects DeepArcher to the absence before absence: to be absent of an absence and/or a presence is anomalous, yet it is the case. For Derrida, "The trace is not only the disappearance of the origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 61). Pynchon's descriptions run parallel in that the program appears to step outside of being, as if it predates history itself. Obviously this is simulated space and thus does have its origins somewhere (e.g. Lucas and Justin had to code this scene), but the parallels continue throughout the novel that propose that DeepArcher is in itself a void. What is Maxine experiencing, then, if anything at all? As Lucas explains to her through analogy,

> When the earliest Vikings started moving into the northern oceans, there's one story about finding this huge fuckin opening at the top of the world, this deep whirlpool that'd take you down and in, like a black hole, no way to escape. These

> days you look at the surface Web, all that yakking, all the goods for sale, the spammers and the spielers and idle fingers, all in the same desperate scramble they like to call an economy. Meantime, down here, sooner or later someplace deep, there has to be a horizon between coded and codeless. An abyss. (Pynchon, *BE* 357)

The codeless, in this case, is the *nonorigin* Derrida describes. Lucas' description suggests the "existence" of something in the coded world that precedes all coding. Potential may be the best word, as it is neither present (or it wouldn't be *potential*) nor absent (as it has not yet been present). As with the term *resonance*, *potential* denotes a place between; it is something that could eventually come to be but is not yet there. The hole in the top of the earth called Ginnungagap[55] is used analogously here to the Deep Web. Lucas describes this area as a brim, as if the Deep Web is still part of the surface: somewhere down in the Deep Web is *an abyss*, but the Deep Web isn't the abyss itself. It is the path to it, like the journey to the north to find the gap. But at some point, one falls into the gap, the endlessness, outside of being: not just annihilation, but true erasure. Again, we have the anti-commercial optimism here. The idea is downward movement, a sort of death drive aimed at seeking oblivion. It would appear the end of the game comes when one has stepped outside of coding completely, has stepped back into the age when coding was neither there nor absent.

[55] This is not the first time Pynchon has made use of this Nordic tale. Ginnungagap appears in *Against the Day* pp. 126-129: "For in the ancient Northmen's language, '*Gap*' meant not only this particular chasm, the ice-chaos from which arose, through the giant Ymir, the Earth and everything in it, but also a wide-open human mouth, mortal, crying, screaming, calling out, calling back" (128). Pynchon again seems to be fascinated with the idea of a cosmic void. The "Gap" here is the hole through which being came, which implies that it predates creation. Further, the secondary meaning of *calling out* and *calling back* signifies that the gap from which all came can consume and, thus, obliterate all. Once again, Pynchon is literalizing erasure. It is no wonder, then, that David Cowart pairs "Abyss and Logos" (Cowart), suggesting a connection between the void and the word, almost harkening back to the Judeo-Christian idea of God calling forth the world out of absolute nothingness in *Genesis*.

Yet for all this discussion of an aim, as if DeepArcher has an end in itself, I turn now to examine the lack of true direction within the game. In this capacity, Rich argues that "DeepArcher is reminiscent of Second Life; it is like a video game with infinite levels and options, few rules, and no objectives" (Rich), which is useful in understanding the analogs we do have. DeepArcher has avatars, allows people to adopt new personalities, and presents, as Rich notes, a virtually unlimited number of tangential quests and activities to the user. I have written above that the depictions of DeepArcher as a virtual reality are purely fictional, especially for a time in which computer graphics were still rough. The early 2000s presented games like *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* (2001), &c., which still feature somewhat rough figures rather than the smoother graphics we are becoming accustomed to now. Certainly the visuals were a major step in gaming: compare *Super Smash Bros.* (1999) for Nintendo 64 to the much more visually refined *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (2001) for Nintendo Game Cube; the difference two years in gaming can make is astonishing. Though the graphics were improving by this time, they were not as detailed as current video games that are getting closer to immersion and stepping out of uncanny valley. Even so, and despite the fiction, it may be worth mentioning that there is one video game associated with the Deep Web: *Sad Satan*. Even this game is notable for being much less liberating than DeepArcher would lead one to believe of the Deep Web.

Researching the game is particularly difficult due to the lack of reliable information on it. What surfaces are repeated screen captures, YouTube videos claiming to play through it, and a subreddit thread named */r/sadsatan* in which people discuss various versions of the game and issues surrounding it. If the subreddit is any indication, this game does not exist *per se*. Several threads distinguish different versions (e.g. a thread titled "Sad Satan – Clarification on 'clean' files vs. 'clone' ('real' version)") as well as problems associated with the game (e.g. threads

titled "Sad Satan fucked my PC up. What to do ?" and "Who would be interested in seeing the effects of Sad Satan on actual hardware?") (*/r/sadsatan*). Topics like these again suggest the elusive nature of this program: what version is the original, is there even an original, and is this simply a hoax meant to infect PCs? Another thread claims, "I think i [sic] found the original copy" where another believes that the game "[s]eems like a joke…" (*/r/sadsatan*). The contradictory titles lend much to speculation about what appears to be a game that actually originated only after the fact, that is, after people heard the stories. Such is still speculation; there is little if any verification or consistency in the story that definitively proves the games exists as such. It might be argued that the stories came first, and the game came later, but even this cannot be substantiated: without the .onion route or the original(?) downloadable file and only some screen captured images on the surface web, little is known as to the whereabouts of this game or whether it is simply a myth. The analogy, though, seems to run parallel to DeepArcher, the ever-protean game/network that is never the same when Maxine enters repeatedly throughout *Bleeding Edge*.

As Maxine goes further and further into the digital world, the images change, begging the question as to whether or not DeepArcher is actually there. With the change to the Jetsons-like architecture mentioned above that is significantly different from her initial encounter, Maxine notices that the place is not the same, which problematizes the idea of presence in this case. On the one hand, again, if we take DeepArcher as the space itself rather than the actual place, doing so would allow for visual change. Like an empty house, the space is open for remodeling, redecorating, and changing, but the space itself stays the same. However, one may note that the space may not actually be the same in DeepArcher, that each entrance does not guarantee the

same lived experience. Even Pynchon emphasizes plausible sandbox gaming[56] with Maxine expressing exasperation with the fact that "there's been *new material* added" on her most recent entrance, noting that "somebody has been hacking in whenever they feel like it" (Pynchon, *BE* 426). Again, it is quite possible that the nature of the game is simply that of an open space for users to project coding onto. By hacking, users (presumably not permitted in this program) are modifying DeepArcher according to their will. Where the Atari system that appears in *ATHF* and the forums described by Lisa Nakamura in the previous chapter involve accumulation of digital material on top of the existing framework, the hackers here modify the framework itself. With strings of code, they have built upon and modified the original. In doing so, the users create a world within the digital sandbox as it were.

In the tradition of sandboxing, Maxine suggests that coding is *added* rather than modified, almost like painting over the wallpaper of the last tenant's occupancy. However, unlike the remodeled house, DeepArcher's constraints are not as easily recognized. No matter what changes in the house, the house is always recognizable by its dimensions. DeepArcher seems to defy this logic completely. Maxine also characterizes the game as a land

> where you dowse across an empty screen, clicking on tiny invisible links, and there's something waiting out there, latent, maybe it's geometric, maybe begging like geometry to be contradicted in some equally terrible way, maybe a sacred city all in pixels waiting to be reassembled, as if disasters could be run in reverse, the towers rise out of black ruin, the bits and pieces and lives, no matter how finely vaporized, become whole again… (446)

[56] Sandbox games allow the user to explore and often create a world of their own within the coded system. Well known examples of this model are *Minecraft* (2009) and the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise.

Interestingly, she opens this description with the screen rather than the space. It is as if she is denying its existence, which is ironic given that she has consistently viewed DeepArcher as a world rather than as a game. Every description thus far has betrayed the spatial illusion of this particular cyberspace. Going further, she points out that it is *empty* but simultaneously filled with *tiny invisible links* to *something*. Certainly this passage is intensely poignant, given Pynchon's proclivity of moving abruptly from light moments of humor to sharply dark endings. In particular, Maxine's understanding of DeepArcher is contingent upon the recently toppled World Trade Center and the aftermath of 9/11, and her understanding of the cyberspace is one of simultaneous pessimism and hope. In the case of the former, the image conjured is desperation, a lack of clarity as to the purpose of the space. In the latter, this cyberspace that denies the user any clear definition, that is constantly in flux as it is perpetually recoded by hackers, may pose the possibility of wholeness, the potential of all links to line up for a vague yet redeeming *something*. Still, the *sacred city* is one that disorients, and the totality of it might never be understood, denying entrance to "wholeness;" there is no true sense of presence as one is forced to wander the digital corridors of eternity only hoping to find an answer to a question that one does not have.

Like the quest for *Sad Satan*, the disorientation and aimlessness of the game denies any true *telos*: what exactly does one enter DeepArcher for? The objective is always vague at best, and the question is never truly answered within the scope of the novel. One possible answer comes shortly after Lucas' discussion of the abyss. Shortly after Maxine encounters Lucas, she meets a mysterious woman in a digital café who corroborates this idea: "They drive you deeper, into the deep unlighted. Beyond anyplace *they'd* be comfortable. And that's where the origin is," what she calls "the edge of the beginning before the Word" (358). These analogies harken back

to cosmic chaos, prehistoric origins. In this way, the game mirrors lived experience. Consider the scientific advances that attempt to uncover the conditions before the Big Bang, the religious documents dedicated to explaining human existence and what came before it, &c. Human history is a continual question of our origins. Pynchon's parallel of cyber to real here possibly explains the *nonorigin*: there was quite literally nothing, a non-signifier, that predates all signification and notions of presence. The difficulty of language is defining everything, even beyond logic sometimes. To name is to call something into being. Within language and coding systems is the inability to define "nothing," as giving it a name enters it into space and thus determines its linguistic coordinates as corresponding to something outside of language. But "nothingness" is outside of representation altogether. Even empty space is something; it is the opening for objects to enter. True nothingness could not allow this. "Nothing" is that which predates origination, is the *nonorigin* itself. Still, within religious and scientific communities alike, we see the potential that arises out of "nothingness."

If we take the creation of cyberspace as an analog for the creation or beginning of the universe (depending on one's bent), that which precedes is literally nothing. Before cyberspace, there wasn't cyberspace. However, neither was there absence of it, for cyberspace would have at some point needed to be present for this to be the case. People were not concerned with loss of digital connection, dropped wifi signals, &c. Although this sounds like a lament of the so-called "good ol' days," what I am trying to articulate is that there wasn't even a representation in language of these anxieties because the absence had not yet come. There was no expression of lack because there was nothing to miss; it is difficult to mourn the loss of something that has neither been conceived nor actualized. What was there, though, was the potential for cyberspace. Clearly, the potential was always already present as the word also implies *possibility*. This is not

to suggest that Pynchon is proposing an ontological answer of any sort. Pynchon's works tend to resist any such closure. However, the Deep Web for Pynchon approaches the cusp.

After the arrival of cyberspace, though, comes the advent of nostalgia, another space like *possibility*. Nostalgia is captivated with the non-space of a thing once present and an unwillingness to let it remain absent. Interestingly, Pynchon's language does have a tendency to wax nostalgic. *Bleeding Edge*, published in 2013, is rife with references from the turn of the millennium: "Oops!... I Did It Again" by Britney Spears (7), *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* (98), *Kenan and Kel* (340), &c. On another level, characters in the narrative express nostalgia for objects that predate these ones: a ring replica from *Dynasty* (14), a discontinued Ben & Jerry's flavor (132), and so on. Albeit Pynchon dates the novel with these references, consider that things that are present for the characters in the novel are inherently more distant for the reader: the final episodes of *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* aired in 2008, and those of *Kenan and Kel* aired in 2000. Even so, there are objects in the narrative that characters find distance in: "Where's your nostalgia, man, Zima's the bitch drink of the nineties, come on, I'm buyin the first round" (45). In the past, there is enjoyment. In drinking Zima, one is apparently linked to the nineties once again, experiencing it instantaneously, yet also at a remove: it's an artifact of the nineties consumed in the 2000s. Later, Maxine enters a party in which "[o]ne cannot help noticing a certain emphasis tonight on instant nostalgia. Nineties irony, a little past its sell-by date, is in full bloom again down here" (301). Again, the purpose of this kind of memory is to recreate an instance, to produce in the consumer a feeling of *being there* that is already absent. The nineties have passed; they have also come back, if for the moment, as they are envisioned from the standpoint of the 2000s; one cannot escape the understanding of the past in relation to one's own context.

These references are all novelties of a sort, but they are important for ideologically grounding a read of the Deep Web: along with *resonance*, I will add *remembrance* – nostalgia as the middle passive and, thus, as *differance*. Nostalgia functions as a retroactive memory, generally shaded positively as a longing for things as they desirably or (imaginably) were. What is important about nostalgia, though, is its implementation as an unachievable object. It often serves as a medium of political expression not always for the best, but still as a means of persuasion to desire certain conditions of the past. On the social purposes and types of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym discusses its two-fold nature. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym defines the term as follows: "In my view, two kinds of nostalgia characterize one's relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, to one's own self-perception: restorative and reflective" (41). These two types are distinct from each other in that the former "proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" where the latter focuses on "longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (41). The importance of this distinction lies in the danger of willful ignorance in the first type. According to Boym, the restorative covers up any blemishes to recover an idealized past that is distant from the present not just in a temporal sense but in an ideological sense: rather than remembering truly, the one who reconstructs overlooks the past as it truly was. Boym notes the danger of doing so: "The first category of nostalgics do not think themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories" (41). The problem with this form of nostalgia is the deep-seated establishment of a monolithic identity, national or otherwise. Certainly there are harmless

forms of nostalgia like the TV shows and objects listed above from the novel, but the ideological construct itself can be intensely dangerous if followed to the extreme as Boym demonstrates.

Naturally, Pynchon discusses a similar form of nostalgia, critical of its cultural impact. Given Pynchon's proclivity for inversions, this nostalgia is always suspect at best (would we really have a Pynchon novel *sans* this paranoia?). However, the thread of nostalgia in his major works is almost as prominent as entropy. But why emphasize nostalgia if "bleeding edge" means having "[n]o proven use, high risk, something only early-adoption addicts feel comfortable with" (Pynchon, *BE* 78), essentially something coming into its own and, thus, focusing on the future? As Boym suggests, "Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection" (49-50). Perhaps the latter is a fitting tone for Pynchon. On the one hand, he examines the aftermath of 9/11 as well as a dark conspiracy unfolding in cyberspace. However, he is often critical of this kind of memory, as will be discussed shortly. Instead, there is a prevalent irony in Pynchon's words that demonstrates that the desire within nostalgia, coded within DeepArcher as a longing for something beyond coding, is subject to criticism. For Boym and Pynchon, it appears that the desire for a time past can manifest itself in harmful ways. One must, then, consider the restorative sense: it does not favor Pynchonian irony, but rather seeks an object that is shaded only by the desire rather than objective reality. In other words, the object of nostalgia does not exist.

According to Hayles, put into terms of nostalgia and presence, "[o]ne feels lacks only if presence is posited or assumed; one is driven by desire only if the object of desire is conceptualized as something to be possessed." (*HWBP* 285). Although she is discussing the

semiotic square in part again, the definition is fitting for nostalgia. It requires an object given a privileged status of having had a presence (i.e. it must now be absent) in order to be desired. Further, the perceived lack runs parallel to the sentiment of attachment to said object; desire is contingent on absence. However, Hayles emphasizes the psychological nature of nostalgia as a process: the object itself is not present; its presence is replaced with an idea, one that is perhaps purely an idea. It is, after all, the *conceptualized* object rather than the object itself that nostalgia seeks.

Although nostalgia is a notably powerful sensation, the ambivalence with which Pynchon treats nostalgia, though, questions how genuine it truly is. Even this novel critiques the nineties party and, with it, nostalgia:

> The theme of the gathering, officially '1999,' has a darker subtext of Denial. It soon becomes clear that everybody's pretending for tonight that they're still in the pre-crash fantasy years, dancing in the shadow of last year's dreaded Y2K, now safely history, but according to this consensual delusion not quite upon them yet, with all here remaining freeze-framed back at the Cinderella moment of midnight of the millennium when in the next nanosecond the world's computers will fail to increment the year correctly and bring down the Apocalypse. What passes for nostalgia in a time of widespread Attention Deficit Disorder. (Pynchon, *BE* 302)

Though Pynchon seems to have fun with references throughout his works, he takes these very references to task for promoting a static image rather than progress: *Denial*. If nostalgia is a form of memory, it also carries with it an unwillingness to move forward or to accept that time has passed. Again, it is the *conceptualized* object that Hayles and Boym alike describe, an ideal or projection. This party, then, focuses on the *fantasy years* despite the impending (though

inaccurately anticipated) *Apocalypse* of the year 2000. Nostalgia functions in retrospect in this manner: it knows what the stakes were and often ignores them; it's difficult to be anxious about Y2K after it has been demonstrated to have been debunked. However, recreating the conditions of the time period is perfectly possible, yet nostalgia like this sometimes glosses over the details to present the best possible image: *the Cinderella moment*. Importantly, the image is preserved as if hermetically sealed off in a time of its own: it never ages, but always plays as it was. However, this image is a particular form of blinding oneself to any negativity in the past. Boym notes the detachment from reality in restorative nostalgia, primarily because "[t]he past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot. Moreover, the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its 'original image' and remain eternally young" (49). But this is a paradox as history and the past, by their very nature, are the results of age and time. The act of restorative memory, then, is to some extent willful denial of any loss or deterioration. The object of nostalgia ceases to be the thing itself so much as a process, a *becoming* ideal that is perpetually touched up to give the illusion that things were *always as they were*, always in their perfected state.

It is important to note that the object of nostalgia becomes a comparable non-space. Pynchon's use of nostalgia emphasizes the middle space, *differance*, as a parallel to Maxine's situation in DeepArcher. If nostalgia (as remembrance) is middle passive, it stands as an analog of the Deep Web in this novel. Remembrance is, in this capacity, the ability to remember, a potential, rather than the act of remembering (although there is a tendency to use *nostalgia* and *remembering* interchangeably). The hackers of DeepArcher seek the void as a continual process; nostalgia seeks the object without its actualization. The realization of nostalgia, the act of calling the object forth, is also the termination of it. People desire *to* desire – exposing the object of

memory obliterates said desire, the basis of nostalgia. In this way, nostalgia is pure image, a construction. Again, to call the object into being defeats the purpose. Nostalgia must always already have an absence to be called into name; it is, by its very nature, the presence of an absence as well as the inverse. It is *differance*, an impossible condition. Similarly, DeepArcher is this very simultaneity, the border of the void. As Justin says of the program, "No, it was only supposed to be the one thing, like timeless? A refuge. History-free is what Lucas and I were hoping for" (Pynchon, *BE* 373). Isn't this synonymous with nostalgia? The timelessness and the preservation of an idea singularly in stasis suggest a space that doesn't change and transcends dating completely. Boym suggests that "[c]ontemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present" (351). Although nostalgia is generally linked directly to a time period, it still aims to preserve that moment as if pulled out of history into its own space. However, the suggestion correlates to the nature of DeepArcher. On the one hand, the 1999 party suggests a fascination with the past. On the other, DeepArcher suggests that the escapism presented in nostalgia is always fleeting at best, erasing the present at the expense of another time. Nostalgia in this way is connected to the problem of presence: perpetual trace rather than a present/presence. Further, the woman that Maxine speaks with in DeepArcher's café adds to this idea by stating, "There's a faint glow, after a while you notice it – some say it's the trace, like radiation from the big bang, of the memory, in nothingness, of having once been something" (Pynchon, *BE* 359). In the case of DeepArcher and nostalgia alike, trace is emphasized. There is something in the absence, the paradoxical presence of the *was*, so to speak. Although something no longer occupies the space, the absence takes its place. Trace, *differance*, again poses the impossible space between presence and absence: *remembrance* plagues DeepArcher, bringing forth that which cannot exist but necessarily haunts the terrain.

Absence (Windust and Traipse)

As the two previous chapters examine death returning to the screen, Pynchon's expansion of similar theories complicates the notion of presence further. As the Foundling Father and Master Shake pose the problem of embodiment through a digital medium, Pynchon also examines the deteriorating sense of body in the digital realm. If the cyberspace of DeepArcher is ambiguous, the question arises concerning the lived experience of the users within it as well: who inhabits what exactly when they log in? Philip Auslander discusses the first necessary definitions of live performance and recording, using the earliest usages to demonstrate that "radio represented a challenge to the complementary relationship of live and recorded performances that went beyond its role in enabling recording to replace live performances. Unlike the gramophone, radio does not allow you to see the sources of the sounds you're hearing; therefore, you can never be sure if they're live or recorded" (17). The blur between the two demonstrates the problem of listening to a streamed medium: how does one distinguish between a live performance and a recording of a live performance? The only demarcation is the announcement. But, even so, assuming a radio host announces a live performance, could this not also be a recording? Take for the example the famous phrase at the beginning of every *Saturday Night Live* episode: "Live from New York" – but this is said even in re-runs. Auslander's study demonstrates the crux that appears in DeepArcher: what is "liveness?" Is there anything or anyone present within the medium?

The binary of presence and absence continues to dissolve in this way as presence loses its privilege in these recorded media. According to Hayles,

> Telephone and radio thus continued to participate in the phenomenology of presence through the simultaneity that they produced and that produced them. In

> this sense they were more like each other than either was like the phonograph. By contrast, the phonograph functioned primarily as a technology of inscription, reproducing sound through a rigid disk that allowed neither the interactive spontaneity of telephone nor the ephemerality of radio. (*HWBP* 208)

On the one hand, telephone and radio communications are immediate to a degree: one speaks into the phone and is heard almost instantly from the receiver, and radio transmits in "real-time." However, with the advent of recording, voice became separate from a necessary body. What Hayles and Auslander alike note correlates again to the notion of *differance*, a space without absence or presence. Recording technology thus displaced the voice from presence: one's body no longer needs to *be there* to generate sound. Simultaneously, the voice is not absent in a traditional way as it can be heard without its original source, its origin. Though one may argue that the record, the tape, &c., serve as an origin, they problematize the site of the voice: does it come from the recording or the body? The nature of recording renders the "space" of the voice somewhat indeterminate. In the event of the lack of a body, the voice is marked by the same linguistic nature of *differance*, begging again that question of origin.

This problem becomes particularly illuminated through scenes in which Maxine encounters the deceased in the machine, Lester Traipse and Nicholas Windust. I will turn now to focus on a specific sequence of occurrences in DeepArcher, namely Maxine's discussions with these men who have been found dead predating her meetings with them in the digital world: Lester Traipse's body is discovered and documented in a news report (Pynchon, *BE* 198); Windust's is found in an apartment, mauled by feral dogs (408-411). Pynchon provides the physical remains, empty husks, but something there nonetheless, though what we consider the men is now absent. However, they seem to return bizarrely. As *Salon*'s Michael Jarvis suggests,

“Later, DeepArcher will become a space where it’s possible to meet and talk to the deceased – or, in typical Pynchonian equivocation, perhaps merely to their avatars – a space that exceeds the rational and allows glimpses of capitalism’s unimaginable other” (Jarvis). The crux lies between these two possibilities: avatar or real men? Delivery man Marvin explains to Maxine that “[n]othing dies anymore” (Pynchon, *BE* 435). It is as if there is no true death because there will always be residual: files, accounts, debts, profiles, passwords. The digital expanse metaphorically prolongs life after death. Even so, Pynchon doesn’t seem to be using metaphors: dead men are returning to haunt Maxine in DeepArcher, albeit the haunting is of a pleasantly conversational tone.

However, as Auslander posits, we cannot assume one way or another that these men are real or bots. Citing Heather Peel’s “I Chat, Therefore I Am?? An Introduction to Bots on IRC [Internet Relay Chat],” Auslander writes, “The author advises that if you type too fast, lurk in the chatroom without participating actively in the conversation, or use too many automated functions in your chat responses, you may be mistaken for a bot” (19). The implication echoes the purpose of the Turing Test, a method of testing how convincingly an AI could replicate human activity. Alan Turing opens his project by asking, “Can machines think?” (50). From this, he generates a theoretical “Imitation Game” in which a subject must determine through digital, purely textual, communication, which of two people in other rooms is a man and a woman respectively. Extending this, he proposes replacing one of these people with a computer (50-51). The philosophical stakes here are eerily reminiscent to Auslander’s later claims. Contextually speaking, Turing’s experience with computers relies on technology that is now obsolete; the paper was published in 1950. However, he begs a problem that must be addressed: “It was suggested tentatively that the question, ‘Can machines think?’ should be replaced by ‘Are there

imaginable digital computers which would do well in the imitation game?'" (54-55). Instead of treating the computer as a knowledgeable creature, he treats it as a pragmatic series of functions. The question is an epistemological problem for Turing, but Auslander amplifies this to the ontological. The importance of this test returns in Auslander with a reversal: what happens if a human is mistaken for a bot?

Pynchon, though, never appears satisfied with a solid answer to questions such as this bizarre entanglement of lived experience and digital representation. In his earlier text *Inherent Vice*, his character Sparky states quite bluntly, "The system has no use for souls. Not how it works at all. Even this thing about going into other people's lives? it isn't like some Eastern trip of absorbing into a collective consciousness. It's only finding stuff out that somebody else didn't think you were going to. And it's moving so fast, like the more we know, the more we know, you can almost see it change one day to the next" (Pynchon 365). Although he is talking about ARPAnet rather than the Deep Web, Sparky's denial of the metaphysical qualities of the soul in relation to the web implies that the information exchanged is fleeting data rather than present. Connectivity for Sparky is about pragmatic use rather than extension of self or body. It is purely informational.

Importantly, ARPAnet is the predecessor to what we call the Internet. Certainly there is a major difference in the early ARPAnet and the Deep Web that renders the former much more distant from construing an image as presence: ARPAnet is much rawer in terms of data and communication. The Deep Web (or, even more broadly, the Internet now) allows connectivity of image, voice, data, &c. Even so, Sparky's rant against construing ARPAnet with Eastern practices and the exchange of souls as a digital medium readily adapts itself to the current state of the Internet. Although this apparatus is much more complex than in its earlier forms, the

Internet is nevertheless a system of data. Below, I will more thoroughly discuss the nature of coding in relation to presence, but for now, it is worth examining DeepArcher through Sparky's lens: there are no souls on the Internet. So what is there in the digital underworld? Or is it all purely coded?

Late in the novel, Maxine encounters Xiomara, Windust's ex-wife, who relates the story of Xibalba, the Mayan underworld. According to Xiomara, "Windust began hearing Xibalba stories as soon as his unit arrived in country. At first he thought it was another case of having fun with the gringo, but after a while… I think he began to believe, more than I ever did, at least to believe in a parallel world, somewhere far beneath his feet where another Windust was doing the things he was pretending not to up here" (*BE* 443). Pynchon's connection of Windust to Xibalba and a place *far beneath his feet* seems to reach into the underworld of DeepArcher: isn't the Internet but a simulation of space that is truly run through currents around and under us (as well as through the space around us)? Again, Pynchon uses metaphysical and religious imagery to connote something as more than it is. Like Blicero's rocket (00000) in *Gravity's Rainbow*,[57] a powerful object takes on larger ramifications and is amplified in its significance. Although the Deep Web is spacious and sometimes even spectacular (as I've mentioned above, it is subject to urban legend and a mythology of its own due to its inherent obscurity), it is still simply a digital medium. Even the rocket is Blicero's mental projection and presumably only has ritualistic purchase for him. Importantly, Pynchon notes that the worlds run *parallel* with Windust *pretending* there is no connection to his lived experience away from "Xibalba." The loosely veiled comparison here to the Deep Web, even without Xiomara referencing a screen or computer, hints at a cause and effect relationship between life and its digital analog. Hayles sees

[57] The rocket is connected to mythological, Kabbalistic, and pagan images throughout the text, but the most concentrated depiction of the rocket in these terms come towards the end of novel, particularly pp. 761-775.

this idea appear in Donna Haraway's work, arguing that "cyborgs are simultaneously entities and metaphors, living beings and narrative constructions" (*HWBP* 117). Treating a user as a cyborg, a combination of organic and machine into a new organism, reveals that the body in this case is both material and linguistic. One is simultaneously in the seat and on the web, operating the mouse and moving the symbolic cursor. The body and a portion of identity have been displaced into the screen in a digital/physical symbiosis. Perhaps this explains Windust's appearance to some degree, as Xibalba and the Deep Web serve here as Windust's own projection, his avatar *doing the things he was pretending not to up here*. Both of these realms imply trace, but only first through the medium of death: Xibalba is the underworld, after all, and if we are to make the connection to the Deep Web, the natural link would seem to come in the form of a digital Windust.

The traces do not end there, though. Finding new material on Windust's digital dossier on her own computer, Maxine turns to the question of presence: "The first author to suspect here would be Windust himself, trying to look good, except this is insane because Windust is dead. Either it's Beltway tricksters out on maneuvers or the Internet has become a medium of communication between the worlds" (Pynchon, *BE* 427). With new files that were not previously there, Maxine's first guess must be ruled out: Windust is dead. However, the solution provided suggests an either/or model: either the dead can communicate with the living through this digital Ouija board (as, in my previous chapter, Meatwad of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* communicated with the dead through a video game), or someone else must be playing the part of the deceased. Due to this perplexing situation, Maxine starts weighing the option of digitized life after death as she "begins to catch sight of screen presences she knows she ought to be able to name, dim, ephemeral, each receding away into a single anonymous pixel. Maybe not. Much more likely

that Windust remains unlit, terribly elsewhere" (427). Remember the position of Master Shake in my previous chapter: without a body, he appears on the screen and is recognized as himself, even without a physical analog. Where is the deceased if the body is no longer there, and where especially if the deceased appears through a screen? Maxine's best guess regarding Windust is *terribly elsewhere*. However, this may mean that the avatar before him is not present, that Windust is remotely controlling the figure. But from where?

Pynchon repeatedly cycles back to the issue of digital absence and its ontological ramifications: "Even though its creators claim not to Do Metaphysical, that option in DeepArcher remains open, alongside more secular explanations – so when she runs unexpectedly into Lester Traipse, instead of assuming it's a Lester impersonator with an agenda, or a bot preprogrammed with dialogue for all occasions, she sees no harm in treating him as a departed soul" (427). Although Maxine feels the need to act as if Lester is a *soul*, this is a privileged assumption with no grounding other than her own performative choice. Maybe there is *no harm* indeed, but the indication that Lester is in any manner present is a privileged ontological status, bordering on the metaphysical. This program that isn't supposed to *Do Metaphysical* according to its programmers seems to be rife with digital ghosts and traces of the living. However, the implication Pynchon sets up is ambiguous, but it does suggest that the idea that this is a soul or spirit is indeed Maxine's own fixation. If Sparky's assumption in *Inherent Vice* still applies to the network many years later, the metaphysical question here is a moot point: if the dead do not truly inhabit the screen, then Maxine's assumptions are fraught and, again, reduced to performativity. The question remains as to whether or not "Lester" here is truly the man or just a bot, some trick played on Maxine. On the one hand, can one really know? As Auslander

suggests, the nature of the bot is complicated. On the other, the allowance Maxine makes in this thing's identity permits a flexibility in the structure of being.

Due to their nature, these bots are subversive creatures (I refrain here from using the word *beings*). Auslander, continuing on the subject of chatbots, posits further ontological problems: "Since bots are virtual entities, they have no physical presence, no corporeality; they are not dying in front of our eyes – they are, in fact, immortal. Bots can be destroyed or taken out of service, but they do not age or die in any biological sense. They perform live, but they are not a-live, at least not in the same way that organic entities are alive" (20). In this model, liveness is not synonymous with presence, which may be a useful method of reframing how we perceive digital spaces. Assuming the inverse of Maxine, if we take Lester to be a bot, his liveness is in no way affected, and, as such, it is purely performative. The bot is, perhaps, another form of *differance*. As it stands between "alive" and "inanimate," it functions nevertheless. Liveness, then, does not mean *being*. Remember that a bot, no matter how realistic, is simply a string of codes that "learns" to respond to a given input.[58] Still, the uncanniness arises from situations in which the bot seems to understand, mimics awareness. It is important, then, that Lester responds, "I'm not dead, I'm a refugee from my life" (Pynchon, *BE* 427). On the one hand, this could imply that Lester is an escapee, on the run from the power that tried to snuff him. However, this contradicts the fact that his body has been found as mentioned above (198). If he has died, then the meaning of the phrase changes. Death would mean an end to life, and thus he has escaped. But a refugee is one who could potentially return to the homeland, to whom land and identity

[58] An example of a bot that "learns" to respond is Cleverbot, one that seems to have a response to everything, even to the point of obscenity: "PLEASE NOTE – Cleverbot learns from people – things it says may seem inappropriate – use with discretion and at YOUR OWN RISK" (Carpenter). Interactions appear to recapitulate previous responses, though, when one chats with Cleverbot. A more recently relevant example of another compelling AI is that of the failed @TayTweets project. According to Rob Price of *Business Insider*, "Tay proved a smash hit with racists, trolls, and online troublemakers, who persuaded Tay to blithely use racial slurs, defend white-supremacist propaganda, and even outright call for genocide" (Price). Learning bots do pick up from human example, but they tend to fixate on available and prominent input as evidenced by these particular ones.

could be restored. As Svetlana Boym argues, “Electronic mediation traverses national borders, creating different kinds of virtual immigration. […] It is not surprising, then, that the dream of the nation-state is alive and well among the virtual citizens of cyberspace – not all of whom have been chosen to become citizens of the world” (349, 350). Lester’s definition coincides on a literal and metaphorical level, then. First, whether dead or not, he is in the digital space whose international identity is fleeting at best. Certainly servers mark the physical space by proxy of their physical location (i.e. where one stores the server for a website or program could arguably be called the “space” where that portion of the digital world takes place). However, with the use of home computers, that space is pulled out, so to speak, and transplanted in the domestic on the side of the user. The digital space is, again, indeterminate and fluctuating. Further, Lester’s metaphorical placement in what Boym calls *virtual immigration* renders him lost. His identity coincides with the extensions of national space in the digital world as he wanders a liminal space between life and death: to whom does he belong, and will he return? He is a digital nomad, unable to navigate his way to a stable identity. In this way, the digital world renders any notion of presence problematic.

Wandering through the simulated space of the digital medium, possibly a refugee herself, Maxine considers the nature of death and its tenuous connection to the screen: “If these are not the actual voices of the dead, if, as some believe, the dead can’t speak, then the words are being put there for them by whoever posted their avatars, and what they appear to say is what the living want them to say. Some have started Weblogs. Others are busy writing code and adding it to the program files” (Pynchon, *BE* 358). What her pondering suggests, then, is that the digital world becomes a surrogate for a true afterlife. If one does not believe in the afterlife, a person can construct one for the deceased (as I have discussed extensively in the previous chapter in relation

to Lisa Nakamura's studies of forums and digital bereavement). However, this is only a coping mechanism if *the dead can't speak* – the words are mediated to present the deceased as living, but only as conceived by the living themselves. Human nature is to imagine the best of those who have passed, and thus the image would be pure construction, pastiche of the departed. To take this further, I propose examining the situation at hand in the capacity that everything digital is *always already mediated* and thus never a direct representation of the user. Alive or dead, the digital avatar never presents the thing as it *is*. As Maxine begs the question, "who was she talking to?" (411), thus posing the ontological problem for this novel: what is there when one talks to someone over the screen? What we must consider here is that the very medium is susceptible to the problem of identifying presence or absence.

How stable can coding be then? Above, I referenced Auslander's use of Heather Peel's "I Chat, Therefore I Am??," a text on the nature of bots in the chatroom. As good indication of Hayles' theory of flickering signifiers and the instability of the web, the website no longer exists outside of Auslander's text (and possibly in other secondary references elsewhere). Significantly, this is only one example of a lost text. Although it does nothing to render Auslander's claim invalid, it is comparably significant that one of his six sources, and the only one that is purely digital, no longer exists. Perhaps the author refused to renew payment for the server space, or decided the article was not worth hosting for whatever reason, but now it does not exist save for its references in other texts, Auslander's probably the most prominent. This is the nature of the coded world. As Sparky of *Inherent Vice* notes in his rant against metaphysics in the system, the information is susceptible to changes in availability on a daily basis (365). A bit naïve, he states, "It's all data. Ones and zeros. All recoverable. Eternally present" (365). Although he is indeed talking about ARPAnet rather than the modern web, he is talking about digitized information,

which is *not* eternal as evidenced by Auslander's citation. All it takes is the erasure of some lines of code, and the website is gone.

With this fragility in mind, the signification system is, for Hayles, always at a remove, further than spoken and written language. What we are looking at when we look at a text or image on the screen is never that text or image *as such*. It is always mediated through the screen. The same can be said about the voice: the recorded or projected voice is presented through the speakers, giving the sensation of a present body. However, each of these instances requires the device to bring them into a fictional being. When one speaks on Skype to another person, it is only an image of that person, not the person actually made present. However, they are not completely absent either: how can you speak with somebody if he isn't there? As Hayles writes in "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," the article version of the chapter of the same title in *How We Became Posthuman*, "Questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage in this situation, for the puppet [i.e. a digital motion capture avatar that replicates a user's movements] both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen" ("Virtual Bodies"). Yet another paradox is presented in the digital world: any action that is performed by the user may be replicated by the "puppet," but at the same time it is simply a string of code that simulates said action. What one sees on the screen can always be reduced to code. There is a hint of extension here, but the idea remains that the user is always behind (rather than *is*) the puppet, moving the strings with the flick of the wrist and a click of the cursor.

Similarly, in response to Auslander's theory concerning bots, Herbert Blau briefly discusses the nature of this performance "in which [Bunraku] puppets were preferred to actors whose impoverished subjectivity only got in the way," noting that "[w]hatever the ontological distinction between the one-dimensional figures on the screen and the presumably rounded

figures in perspective on the proscenium stage, the felt actuality was such, in various productions I saw, that the quotient of liveness seemed more in the transparency of film" ("The Human Nature" 243). Interestingly enough, he and Hayles use the metaphor of the puppet to depict the user:interface connection. However, Blau takes it a step further and views the puppet as the true performer and the true subject where the body simply gets in the way rather than the other way around. The experience hinges on the puppets' liveness rather than that of the human body, for Blau is fascinated by what takes place in the space of theater, much like this text I am producing focuses on what takes place in the Deep Web and DeepArcher. For Blau, "the presence of live actors made no real difference: stage or screen, the effect and/or affect was very much the same" (243) – liveness was identical for direct and mediated performance. The puppet, then, bears the same liveness as the human that moves it. However, we must take into account Hayles' preoccupation with the fragility of the puppet, that is, with its code. Albeit the human body is subject to its own "glitches," sicknesses that deteriorate the system, sometimes to the point of death, the puppet's coding is much more fragile. Where the body can develop antibodies, the puppet cannot. Yes, there are defenses such as antivirus software, but what I am referencing here is that any line of coding misplaced can lead to spectacular failure.[59] Sometimes, a program can work around these lines, but sometimes they can be fatal.

Bleeding Edge amplifies this problem, though. With DeepArcher presented as a virtual reality, Hayles' flickering signifiers serve to demonstrate the fragility of the coded world. Even if Maxine sees and talks to someone (to *whom?*), the question of *what* must be asked as well. Every

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[59] Gaming seems to be the most obvious place where bugs can lead to humorous failure. For example, even if it sounds digressive to the matter at hand, the indie game *Goat Simulator* (2014) developed by Coffee Stain Studios features purposeful use of system malfunctions. The game is another example of sandboxing with some mild objectives and side quests, but the main appeal is the number of glitches that leave the game a comical mess. I cite this game as an example of the idea of *spectacular failure* in its most intentional and most positive sense. For more information on the game, see http://www.goat-simulator.com/.

image, every sound, every text that originates from the screen is backed by flickering signifiers, strings of code that are conveniently hidden behind the mask of a GUI. Each time a user sees something, it is never that thing, but an assemblage of hidden coding. Regarding the reduction of lived experience to this form of code, much like Sparky of *Inherent Vice*, Keith Staskiewicz's review of *Bleeding Edge* in *Entertainment Weekly* suggests that "our lives are being converted ever more into zeros and ones" (Staskiewicz). Reality itself is becoming coded, represented at a remove. Pynchon clearly takes this to the extreme in positing a digital immersion from which Maxine cannot distinguish the digital world from lived experience outside of the screen. However, Hayles believes the nature of the Internet "enact[s] a division between the material body that exists on one side of the screen and the computer simulacra that seem to create a space inside the screen" (*HWBP* 20). In this way, we can separate the world inside and outside, or at least according to this logic. The problem arises in the fact that the Internet has progressed since the initial publication of *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Nevertheless, its proximity to the context of *Bleeding Edge* may be useful in that the novel takes place not too long afterwards (i.e. in 2001).

Even so, Pynchon seems to be viewing 2001 with rose-colored lenses in that the Internet is idealized and remembered through terms that are more current: his Deep Web is still years away from actualization, if it will ever come to fruition. His image of the web, though, questions Hayles' own. For example, Hayles suggests above that although there is a link between body and image, there is still an inherent divide in the extension from reality proper to the interior world of the computer no matter how interrelated they may be. Certainly she addresses this thoroughly elsewhere in the text, but the rhetoric here does emphasize the schism that isn't readily present in *Bleeding Edge*. Tallis laments that her husband and "ex-to-be [Gabe] is trying to delete me, my

existence, from the Internet" (Pynchon, *BE* 455). Tallis' concern emphasizes the risk of becoming trace: *trying to delete me* is cut off from the consequent prepositional phrase, whether or not Pynchon intended to do so. Her concern seems to go against Hayles' divide, as if one's identity is so entwined with the Internet that to delete profiles and accounts is to cease to exist. Regardless of this slight disparity, Hayles does see a link between usage of technology and the body when the *simulacra* react to the user. However, the idea here is surrogacy, as with her discussion of the avatars.

Applying this idea of the failure of language for Hayles as the inability to maintain significance and the flaw for Derrida as that of getting at the thing itself, then, to the digital realm of flickering signifiers, the images of Windust and Traipse were never present to speak of. First, we can look at them as signifiers for a given signified. As avatars of the men, the images on the screen only recall the men by proxy (consider again how Master Shake appears in a new form in the previous chapter, purely through 8bit technologies). As mentioned above, the digital representation is always at a remove that prevents an encounter with another user as such. Bot, human, or ghost, all coding is mediated. But, then again, all language happens by proxy according to these theories. Hayles amplifies Derrida's theory, though, and complicates matters by suggesting that these signifiers, which are already unstable, are strung together in coding in a more complex hierarchy. Because of the complications posed by the nature of this system, there is no way for Maxine to verify the truth of the matter at hand. The signification system is unstable, and sometimes the signifier is deferred, not immediately available: one does not always get to see the source code, one does not always encounter the user who is projecting an avatar, one does not know if the dead are truly entering into this digital discourse. To some extent, DeepArcher is the journey it is claimed to be, but one without direction, one in which answers

are unavailable. The user in the interface encounters others only at a distance, reduced to the informational structuring of code, whether alive or dead. Unfortunately, Maxine's experience will be "rambling some DeepArcher of the unshared interior, her click history vanishing behind her like footprints in the air" (218): lost, void, and irrecoverable. She is, to a degree, left without answers as to where she is, or with whom she has been speaking.

Refusing a true answer to the identity of the avatar, Pynchon seems to view Lester as neither alive nor dead. Lester, then, epitomizes *differance* in "*that* differance *is not*, does not exist, and is not any sort of being-present (*on*). And we will have to point out everything *that* it *is not*, and, consequently, that it has neither existence nor essence. It belongs to no category of being, present or absent" ("Differance," 227). Consider the character in the video game that seems to look at you, follows you, watches you as if scrutinizing your every move. The eyes almost seem aware. However, the bot is indifferent, does not feel, does not see, has no being whatsoever, no matter how convincing it may be. A bot, according to Auslander, falls into the space that Derrida describes.

However, we have yet another problem: what if Lester isn't a bot? What if Lester *is* Lester? Auslander posits a new relationship to liveness due to digital *differance*:

> The appearance of the Internet chatterbot therefore does not occasion a redefinition of liveness or a realignment of the conceptual relationship between live and recorded performances, as did the earlier development of radio. But what the chatterbot does occasion is considerably more profound: it undermines the idea that live performance is a specifically human activity; it subverts the centrality of the live, organic presence of human beings to the experience of live

> performance; and it casts into doubt the existential significance attributed to live performance. (21)

Although this description focuses on the bot's lack of presence, it does point to how one might approach the ontology of digital space. The effect of the bot leads one to reassess the privileging of humanness and lived experience. So, if Lester is indeed *there* in DeepArcher, he must in fact be absent in a way: he is dead. The refugee, then, seems another fitting image of *differance*. The refugee is a person who is perpetually nomadic, lacking a home. Being a refugee in this case entails a process. Again, the journey analogy surfaces: DeepArcher as an experience rather than as a place, each user moving through the program in a state of *becoming* without ever statically being. However, there is no way Maxine can verify Lester's identity: "If it's really you, Lester, I hate to think of you being lost down here" (Pynchon, *BE* 428). *If*. The performance is convincing, but there is no signification of the user on the other end (i.e. nothing that indicates who is operating the avatar, if anyone).

A few scenarios arise. The first is the one above, the bot. A program that is responsive has donned the appearance of Lester, whether by intention or coincidence, and is responding to Maxine. Accordingly, the user:avatar method is problematized; a bot is pure code. Another possibility is that of trolling, someone donning Lester's identity and pretending to be him. Such would not be implausible for a Pynchon novel in which identity is never completely certain.[60] Finally, we have the possibility that Lester is in a digital hell or purgatory, actually dead, actually replicable on the screen. If liveness can be imitated through performance, what about death? Regardless of the metaphysical implications of haunting, and even if Lester is a ghost, his avatar is purely coded. Much like the incident involving Master Shake in the previous chapter, Lester's

[60] There are many double agents within Pynchon's collective works: "Bigfoot" Bjornsen of *Inherent Vice*, Deuce Kindred of *Against the Day*, Katje Borgesius of *Gravity's Rainbow*, &c.

lack of body does not prevent him from returning. In these scenarios, the man/ghost/bot is reduced to a coded representation, rendering the question of the controller null to some extent. As Lester retorts, “Lost down here is the whole point” (428). Because the system of DeepArcher clearly hinges on avatars rather than face-to-face technologies like Skype or FaceTime, all one sees in this world is representation: the other user one is interacting with is always at a remove. It is a land of “flickering signifiers” and *differance*, marked by its very inability to *be*. Its users wander through it, and for Pynchon, that is possibly the end goal. Rather than a solution, perhaps these characters are meant to enact a process. Journeying herself, Maxine will not have an answer to the question surrounding the *If* statement; all identifying markers of this non-space are lost to coding, which, ultimately, is equally unstable.

Coda

"This Beautiful Television"[61]:

Ontology of a Blank Screen

"Hey, what do you guys do when the screen goes black?"
~Dr. Hartman on *Family Guy* ("Trading Places")

"This beautiful television has put me, like I said before, in all sorts of situations."
~Björk on television ("The Sugarcubes")

Walking through my neighborhood recently, I encountered a bizarre object in the surrounding woods: a television console with a broken screen. Kicked in, smashed, whatever may have happened to it, the glass was shattered. The mechanism lay docile in the foliage. As out of place as the TV was in the middle of a patch of kudzu, there was something notable about the screen: it would never work again. Ultimately, the leaves will take over, and the object will be buried by plants as time goes by. Like Andre Breton's locomotive in his poem "Postman Cheval," the television in the woods is marked by what he calls "convulsive beauty." According to Jean-Pierre Cauvin, "Breton then goes on to define convulsive beauty not as motion proper, but as […] the very moment at which movement stops" or "motion in suspension or in repose" (17). The object retains its properties to some degree, but it is modified by its new context. The cessation of motion is not such that it comes to a complete stop, but, like the people of Pompeii, is captured in a paradoxical contrast of movement and stillness. It becomes, then, a monument to its former self. Referencing "Postman Cheval" as an example, Cauvin notes this beauty stands in "*stasis* subject to imperceptible change" (18), similar to the notion of *differance* discussed above. In this particular poem, Breton writes of "the locomotive preyed upon by immense barometric roots / That cries out dolefully in the virgin forest with all of its mauled boilers / Its stacks

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[61] I borrow this title from Björk's responses in "The Sugarcubes – Björk, Television Talk (1988) – [DVD Rip HD]," cited below.

puffing hyacinths and propelled by blue serpents" (109.9-11). Breton's descriptions suggest that the new context leaves the train stopped, but not completely still. The exchange of flowers for smokestacks gives the illusion that the machine is constantly pushing forward, emitting flora as it seems to progress while staying in place. The juxtaposition of mechanical and natural does not seem to emphasize decay, but growth. Instead of seeing a rusted locomotive falling apart, Breton sees new life in the machine. Although the train ceases to perform as it did, it is preserved in suspended animation.

In this way, the TV has been reduced to an immobile object, one that will never receive a broadcast again. Its images have been stilled, but there is a new dynamic played out in this "convulsive beauty": it may sit still, but the world around it will continue to fill the hole until the growth of plants takes over the space that used to be composed of moving pictures. It is as if the progression of plant life comes into the opening as an image, ultimately one that will envelope the screen. Mediation *par excellence*: in the absence of the image, reality will fill the gap. In previous chapters, the image moves outwards. Here, the inverse is true of the TV in the woods. In this way, the screen may no longer function according to its original purpose, but we must consider what it has become: if the television ceases to operate as intended, where does this place the viewer who has been enmeshed in the image?

Throughout the course of this project, I have addressed multiple situations in which the television and other devices absorb the viewer or otherwise pose a philosophical problem for how one perceives presence on the screen. I have examined how several texts have built upon existing theories as well as the transitions over time in response to ideas of embodiment and viewership. I turn now to consider a new ontological position of the user in front of the blank screen. As asked above, what happens at the moment the TV is turned off? The first of the two

epigraphs comes from an episode of *Family Guy* in which Dr. Hartman poses the question just before the credits roll. Although Dr. Hartman's question is clearly meant to add to the comedy of the animated sitcom, it presents a bizarre ontological crisis: what happens to the characters after the end of the show? The metacommentary on the performativity of the characters' roles suggests an awareness that they are purely televised, that the Griffin family and Dr. Hartman know that they are in the screen. But if they are self-aware, the comedic moment takes on a larger philosophical scope. Regardless of whether creator of *Family Guy* Seth MacFarlane intended this (and it is doubtful that he did), the joke does have significance for the status of being. If a viewer is also metaphorically stuck in the screen as my previous chapters have suggested, what comes next?

First, we must consider the traumatic rupture: the sudden blackness of the screen, the unexpected end of noise. Albeit Breton imagines a positive relationship to the machine that has been overcome by nature, the object that is preserved in its movement, there are some problems that must be addressed in relation to the blank screen. As an example of trepidation when one encounters such a screen, John Gardner opens his novel *October Light* (1978) with something of the uncanny as James Page destroys the television console purchased by his sister: "There was little in this world he considered worth buying. That was one reason that in the darkness behind him the television gaped like a black place where once a front tooth had hung" (Gardner 1). Although James' sister Sally enjoys the images, James is watching her in turn, viewing the viewer rather than the console itself. The image conjured for him is one of absence: the missing tooth. Albeit a face with a lost tooth can be a comical one, it can have implications of illness, decay, and grotesque mockery. It is not uncommon for a tooth to be painted black for comic effect, which is perhaps why James sees the screen as something uncanny. In it is an emptiness

that presents James with an uncomfortable situation, a hole in the living room. Almost like Thomas Pynchon's depiction of the Deep Web in *Bleeding Edge* or the Foundling Father in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*, Gardner's description marks the TV as a void, a site of emptiness, rather than as an object in the room. It is as if by its very insertion into the domestic sphere, it has generated its own absence.

Perhaps this is why James, of a different generation's mindset, reacts so negatively to the technology. Certainly there is something ideological about his aversion, but the violence of the scenario is out of proportion with the mechanism. Out of rage, James "[takes] the twelve gauge shotgun to it […] for its endless, simpering advertising and, worse yet, its monstrously obscene games of greed, the filth of hell made visible in the world: screaming women, ravenous for refrigerators, automobiles, mink coats, ostrich-feather hats; leering glittering-toothed monsters of ceremonies" (2). Continuing on the thread of the abyss, James perceives the TV as almost something out of Dante, a *hell* filled with noise and filth. Like Pynchon's text, we have an admixture of anti-Capitalist sentiment and an overwhelming number of images, and like Master Shake's situation, the screen becomes infernal. Ideologically speaking, perhaps it isn't the TV itself so much as the images that James is enraged by.

However, as the description above suggests, James is also irritated by the console when it is off. As a response to the screen, "he'd loaded the shotgun while the old woman, his sister, sat stupidly grinning into the flickering light – long-nosed, long-chinned, black shadows dancing on the wall behind her – and without a word of warning, he'd blown that TV screen to hell, right back where it come from [sic]. It might have been a tragedy" (1-2). What we see here is a virtual reversal of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."[62] Note that Sally Page Abbott stares numbly into the screen, almost completely vacant. Certainly, Gardner frames Sally as a strong woman who

[62] See Plato's *Republic*.

ultimately outsmarts her brother after he has confined her to the attic as a punishment for what he deems as her contrary actions. Still, the description here of Sally as "stupidly grinning" points to the captivation of the screen. Instead of being limited to seeing reality as the shadows on the wall in Plato's cave, Sally sees the light of the TV, unaware of the physical/visual effects it generates behind her. Nevertheless, the action of staring into the light itself, though modified from the original allegory, still serves the same proverbial purpose. The TV becomes the new shadow, so to speak, as reality is nevertheless mediated for Sally through the screen. In Plato's model, the shadow is reality at a remove. Gardner has simply revered the source of light and the resulting mediation: the fire behind the person in the cave becomes the very medium of expression in the TV.

Still, for all the fleeting images, for all that seems to spring out of the abyss, James' shotgun reifies the ontological status of the television as an object: by destroying it, he has solidified it as passive and inanimate. Gardner here amplifies this decimation to the tragic, perhaps more so for Sally than for James. In any case, the act of turning the screen off is equated to overbearing violence and trauma. James' irritation may be justified to some extent, but rather than removing the TV, selling it, or giving it away, he opts for pure obliteration. But isn't this what happens to the image, technically speaking, every time someone turns off the screen? On a smaller scale, the act of shooting out the screen is always replicated in turning off the TV: after noise, silence. No, there isn't always a blast, but consider how a line is cut short by the press of a button. Still, the visual narrative and the sound emanating from the speakers come to a fast end. At this point, the viewer is left with a gap. Again, this dramatization points at the significant rift between television and the world surrounding it: the viewer must assess the difference at some point, and often abruptly.

Years later in film, we have a parallel situation. David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* (1983), a spectacular body horror concerning the lack of distinction between image and reality, ends on a similar note to that which opens *October Light*. Alone, in front a TV screen, protagonist Max Renn (played by James Woods) watches a broadcast of himself committing suicide by gunshot to the head. Before he replicates this in the real world (or at least the closest to reality he may ever experience), his TV self pulls the trigger, and a slew of viscera explodes from the TV screen. Shortly after, when Max Renn actually shoots himself, the screen goes black (Cronenberg). Why do we see these graphic depictions of a screen filled with bodily organs? Why do we have these violent moments in which a gun or an explosion is juxtaposed with TV viewership? What we must consider is that turning the TV off is an inherently traumatic action, albeit small in scale. The exaggerative depictions of Cronenberg and Gardner are important to frame the shift, but certainly a viewer does not experience death or gunfire every time the TV is turned off. However, there is a mental shift: what does the viewer do after the screen goes black? The viewer must reconfigure the psyche to move away from it, must reenter the outside world. Albeit this tends to be miniscule and automatic (i.e. one does not emerge from a cocoon-like slumber in a dramatic manner), there is a change from purely mediated to lived experience. The psychical coordinates have changed. Still, I suggest here that even with this traumatic change, there is optimism, for one can examine the screen as an object and, thus, understand it apart from the images it broadcasts.

Although there are repeated depictions of this violent shift, I turn now to examine the more positive light of turning off the TV. Yes, the examples above are hyperbolic, but the metaphors that come with them are significant for how we perceive the screen. In any case, not all is lost when the screen goes off. In contrast to the negativity of the examples above, Icelandic

musical artist Björk of all people presents unique comparisons that serve as a new model for understanding our relationship to the vacant screen. In an interview from the late 80s, Björk opens a screen and discusses with the viewer the personal resonance of the TV for herself. Björk's dismantling of the television console presents us with another level of depth that has not been addressed in the previous chapters: the internal mechanisms and hardware that allow the system to operate. In the course of her interview, she examines the console and its components rather than turning it on; we have entered the TV through another entrance. What is important to note from this interview is the new metaphorical resonance the screen has once it is dissected, once electricity no longer runs through it.

To examine this new relationship to the television, Björk states, "I've switched the TV off, and now I want to see how it operates. […] It's about time" ("The Sugarcubes"). Instead of discussing the TV in a literal context, Björk examines it through a more poetic lens, equating the components to a landscape: "this looks like a city, like a little model of a city" ("The Sugarcubes"). Is this not the nature of "convulsive beauty?" As stated in the second epigraph above, Björk does call this screen *beautiful*, an unusual term for television. But perhaps this beauty originates in the fact that, even when off, the way she perceives the object is through perpetual movement in stillness. The *little model of a city* conjures an image of life, even when the model is static. Consider the stillness of an actual scale replica of a city. Nevertheless, there is still an implicit movement captured in it: simulacra of townspeople about their day, cars stuck forever in traffic, lights on and off to suggest the illusion of life. The analogy to the city suggests that even when the TV is off, there is a "convulsive beauty" about it. Mind that this interview takes place in 1988, meaning that the technology, though not necessarily primitive, has changed significantly since, especially when compared to Pynchon's conception of web technologies.

Each year, TVs are becoming increasingly flat and are incorporating more Internet-based applications, so the analogies may change. However, the relationship to the screen is still that of codependence.

What Björk is doing, then, demonstrates that the TV still bears a significant relation to the viewer even when it is off. Even with the more positive images conjured, the screen is a powerful force, unnerving to the point of terror. Björk recollects her initial perceptions of the screen and the fear therein:

> I remember being very scared to it because an Icelandic poet told me that, not like in cinemas, where the thing that throws the picture from it just sends light on the screen, but this is different. This is millions and millions of little screens who send light, some sort of electrical light, I'm not really sure. But because there's so many of them, and in fact you are watching very many frames when you're watching TV. Your head is very busy all the time to calculate and put it all together into one picture. And then because you're so busy doing that, you don't watch very carefully what the program that you are watching is really about. So you become hypnotized. So all that's on TV, it just goes directly into your brain, and you stop judging it's right or not.[63] ("The Sugarcubes")

Perhaps there is something generational between Björk and the poet who informed her of the projecting qualities of the TV, a difference in perception due to the respective relation to technology of people at different ages. Even so, Björk's trepidation is not unfounded. As discussed in the preceding chapters, the image has a power over the viewer and her perception of the world around. Björk notes in particular the sensory overload of the television, which runs

[63] I want to note that I have made minor edits to this quotation. Björk's English is idiosyncratic, and she stutters a few times as she speaks. However, the transcription above is accurate, eliminating certain repetitions for conciseness. The meaning has not been altered in any way.

parallel to James Abbot's perception of Sally as a viewer. In particular, one who watches television is, in theory, watching many mini screens that make up a larger image. Like pointillist art, the television image is a composition of smaller pixels. Perhaps the idea is exaggerated yet again, but the way Björk understands the television and fears it due to the poet's explanation is important as it cautions the viewer: TV is expressly produced as a sedating medium. It is a psychological overload of pixels and an increasing number of overly-saturated channels. Yet, for all its power, Björk questions the initial fear instilled in her by the Icelandic poet. Ultimately, Björk reverses her initial opinion after reading a more scientifically grounded text on television, after which she concludes, "You shouldn't let poets lie to you" ("The Sugarcubes"). What she once approached with fear, she now approaches with respect and awe: "this beautiful television" ("The Sugarcubes"). Consider that Björk's responses suggest that her relationship to the TV is not always when it is off; she does in fact watch quite a bit. She is quite familiar with the images on the screen and how they function.[64] However, even for the "lies" she was fed concerning the television, she has embraced the screen as a spectacular apparatus. In this way, she can relate to the screen on or off and, thus, sees it as a useful mechanism in both capacities. However, the implication here is that to truly understand one's relation to the image requires the screen to go blank. Björk's viewership does not completely stop when the screen is off, but even so, she relates ways in which we can understand the placement of the apparatus in our homes and in our lives.

Further, I would like to note a novel phenomenon that is perhaps familiar to most people, if not so ubiquitous as to be overlooked: Björk's reflection appears in the blank screen ("The

[64] Early in the interview, Björk acknowledges that she has "been watching it [i.e. television] very much lately" ("The Sugarcubes"). In retrospect, she notes the consequences of the Icelandic poet's words and the mental hold they had over her: "I always got headaches when I watched it," which fortunately changed for the singer ("The Sugarcubes"). These statements suggest in turn familiarity with, tension because of, and acceptance of the screen. Björk's statements are based in personal experience, and they reveal various stages of the viewer in front of the image.

Sugarcubes”). When the image is not moving outward, the world is moving inward, always an inverse relationship. Like the kudzu filling the console in the woods, the world enters the space of the image. The viewer’s relationship to the television is reversed when it is off, then, as the reflected visage appears in place of the image one was so consumed with. To some extent, one cannot leave the console as the reflection is confined by the square of the black screen. Still, it does propose a new manner of examining how we relate to our electronic devices. Can we escape the image? Yes and no. One can always leave the room, but it is almost as if the world will always be framed by the television in reflection. The fact that one can watch the world mediated, even when the TV is off, problematizes how much of it we truly experience. If reality is always already reduced to a picture, then lived experience is as well. However, the fact that the screen becomes mirror-like leaves the opportunity for seeing the self as one always does: in reverse in the glass. It is notable that the image one sees is, then, also the most familiar, linking the TV to the self in a significant way. We experience ourselves most directly through the body, but our visual understanding is always already mediated: we never see ourselves as others see us. The significance of this reflection is that there are some direct connections between the mediated world and the understanding of the self; to turn off the TV is to generate this reflection. In these moments, when the image is that of the self rather than that of a fictional world, albeit both are mediated, the viewer is allowed some level of self-reflection and introspection. Perhaps the unlit screen is a beacon of optimism as Björk would suggest, allowing for novel understandings of how the self is connected directly to the image.

My intent with this project has not been to advise the reader not to watch television, not to use the web, or otherwise, but rather to examine the positioning of the viewer and to expound upon the consequences of immersion. I am guilty myself of watching TV consistently while

continuing writing. Had I not, certain portions of this project would more than likely not have come to fruition. Because of the screen's prominence in our culture, I propose that we try to understand our relationship to the screen and be aware of these consequences, be aware of how immersive it can be. Further, it is important that we examine the metaphors with which we understand said relationship, and that we remain aware that the television, though an object, has major cultural currency. The aim is not to vilify the screen *per se*. Rather, it is to problematize the general complicity with which the screen is received and to be skeptical of the images that saturate the medium. The examples I have presented have been notably extreme in their representations of the television and computers, but that is not to say that they are not valid. The concerns expressed are important and necessary; American culture is dominated by the screen, and it is showing no signs of relenting. Rather than taking James Abbott's method, rather than resorting to violence, I suggest taking Björk's approach: assessing, analyzing, and responding accordingly. We should meet the screen with some level of apprehension, but the viewer/user should always understand his relationship to the screen when it is off as well. Its psychic resonance cannot be underestimated. Perhaps it is best, then, to understand one's connection to the ubiquitous image of the screen by stepping away from it and taking time to process it rather than accepting passive immersion and consumption.

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