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Lanfranco Aceti

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Eternally present and eternally absent: the cultural politics of a thanatophobic Internet and its visual representations of artificial existences

LANFRANCO ACETI

Arts Administration Program, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT   *Have contemporary digital technologies as well as aesthetic and cultural approaches reinforced the simulacral representations of a thanatophobic society? This essay analyses the processes of data preservation and self-eternalisation that construct personal and social narratives that offer to the individual the illusion of memorialisation and eternalisation. It is in this context that postmodern and aesthetic cultural constructions provide an opportunity for self-musealisation avoiding a sociopolitical questioning of the regime of truth, and allowing, through a constant replay of the image, the construction of the illusion of humanity's eternal presence.*

KEYWORDS: aesthetic; death; thanatophobia; digital data; memorialisation; eternalisation; immortality

Repetition, memorialisation and eternalisation

Perhaps nothing is more representative of a thanatophobic society than the process of accumulating and storing virtual data in online environments (Fulton, 1997, pp. 332–333). This process of accumulation and storage of data has become a behavioural and daily activity for many – manifested through a series of different platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Vimeo, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Academia.edu, Skype and Delicious (just to name a few) – and is no longer solely a reflection of personal engagements but also of a collective immortality of the Ego/Hero realised via the mediation and remediation of death (Christensen & Sandvik, 2014). The collective immortal Ego/Hero is now rooted in contemporary technological phenomena of cyclically mediated narratives, mythologies and post-identities in a post-postmodern society (Nell, 2013).

> The thorny questions arising from all the limitations that make us human were once addressed by myths that featured gods, goddesses, and the variety of beings and rituals that for many provide satisfactory answers. Today, it is the spiritual machines and their world of cyberspace that hold out the hope of overcoming life's limitations. (Mosco, 2004, p. 78)

Correspondence: E-mail: aceti@bu.edu

The relationships between the user, the data uploaded and the cultural politics of the Internet have created a framework within which personal information, images and surfing behaviours are existential data themselves: 'a precession of simulacra' in Baudrillardian terms for the construction and memorialisation of personal narratives of immortality.[1] These data are framed within a context of eternal presence/confirmation of existence and memorialisation of absence and loss in order to fulfil the immortality imperative. Data are uploaded from users as a form of validation and confirmation of their being present and existing; no matter that they are commercialised by companies and individuals through the economic exploitation of crowdsourcing in the larger context of globalised and mediated post-capitalistic societies. This is a collective obsession with '"self-musealisation" by video recorder, memoir writing, and confessional literature [...] with its uneasy negotiation between fact and fiction' (Huyssen, 2000, pp. 24–25) leading to the production of a *self-curated digital Ego/Hero* which breaks the dichotomy of 'fictional death' and 'real death' (Gibson, 2007, p. 417) in a meta-world where these two worlds no longer collide but coexist and overlap. This process of collective and individual self-curation renders it increasingly difficult 'to create public spheres of "real" memory that will counter the politics of forgetting pursued by post-dictatorship regimes either through "reconciliation" and official amnesties or through repressive silencing' (Huyssen, 2000, p. 26).

The cultural and political contexts within which the process of data/self uploading generates phenomena of existence beyond death (eternalization) makes it nearly impossible to delete one's online existence. This process of deletion is different from 'the right to be forgotten', (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009) since the disappearance from the public eye in order to be forgotten does not entail the deletion of the items from the multiple databases upon which they are hosted. In this sense, there is a complicated matrix at work where accumulation, deletion, forgetting, eternalisation and memorialisation intertwine, creating a sociopolitical landscape where the individual and collective truths that create myths, narratives and identities also generate a convenient 'political forgetting' which obscures 'the histories and memories that have been dropped from the prevailing "regime of truth"' (Kovacevic, 2006, p. 635). These regimes of truths have become a collective tool for a crowdsourced 'erection of a monument – or anti monument – equal to the phallic inanity, in its time, of the Eiffel Tower. A monument to total disconnection, to hyper-reality, and to the cultural implosion actually created by transistor networks continually threatened by a huge short-circuit' (Baudrillard, 1982, p. 4).

The data uploaded also act as a constant reminder of the absence that is re-played – through photographic, video and digital tools – over and over again as a phenomenon of re-mort and re-morse (Bazin, 2003, p. 30).

In André Bazin's seminal essay *Death Every Afternoon*, the cinematic repetition – which he identified with the re-calling of the image – is both a process of eternalisation of the death event in the moment as it happens as well as an externalisation of the process that leads to the absence of death and the

ontological presence of memory. Life and death as 'binary oppositions implode in the third order of simulacra, thus losing their differentiation in the dough of sameness' (Merrell, 1995, p. 265).

In the post-Internet era, online data constantly replayed have acquired the function of eternalising both presence and absence by inducing a collapse of the 'moment par excellence': the instant of death. By constantly digitising and uploading data/lives, 'digital humanity' finds and confirms its existence as an eternal illusion and an eternal reality that constantly attempt to grasp themselves via a screen in the opposition of real vs. virtual.[2] This happens in an ontological opposition in which both illusion and reality negate the 'qualitative instant in its purest form' (Bazin, 2003, p. 30).

The process of eternalising is embedded in a still developing digital cultural framework that is a constant 'real' virtual presence across time and space (Žižek, 2004). It is this digital cultural framework that, by providing the illusion of cheating death and living in the real moment, enslaves the resemblance of the reality of existence in a post-Internet context framed by the politics of post-postmodern controls and economic exploitation of life and death. It is the digital image that, by collapsing the imagined and the 'real', offers for consumption the anticipated event in a constant fetishistic repetition that reinforces, memorialises and eternalizes, through mediated aesthetics and forms of representations,[3] the contemporary political regime of truth.

Eternity, the digital and a thanatophobic society

In considering the relationship between real, digital and simulacral existence, this essay analyses the political and cultural role of digital images of death as an important element in order to understand the hierarchical structures of power- and memory-making in a personal and collective context of continued tensions and renewed participations in an increasingly Orwellian society.[4] The tension of this constantly renewed need to participate and to be visible in order to be remembered, in a process of constant memorialisation, can be considered a way to re-confirm an existence that has been pushed out of the 'real' and reversed into the screen and that constantly needs to be represented in order to be substantiated, validated and authenticated.

> So it is necessary to go and rebuild a reality for ourselves where the bleeding is. All these 'corridors' we open up to send our supplies and our 'culture' are, in reality, corridors of distress through which we import their strength and the energy generated by their misfortune. (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 47)

This is a digital process of rebuilding of existence and reality through someone else's misfortunes which by producing the dread of death reinforces others' existences by validating and implying the urge to live and to create and accumulate memories; conceived as reproductions of one's Ego/Hero which the distressed, the sick, the soon to be dead will no longer be able to produce.

The accumulation of memories becomes a self-curated process of musealization – a museuification that is at the same time a mummification – where it is within the carcass of the digitised and uploaded body and not within the architectonical elements that the mausoleum is realised for a 'hapless operation of signs' (Baudrillard, 1982, p. 5).

The possibility that people have, through medical imaging, of staring at digital images of their own tumoral masses awaiting to be excited or already extracted from the body offers an insight into the relationship between digital cultural representation and death. In Michel Foucault's (1987, p. 22) words, it is as if the image 'being repeated no longer refers to things themselves but to their reproductions', and life to be lived and felt as real has to constantly produce images to confirm the existence of things and life itself.

The urge to produce images, to reproduce death every afternoon – in Bazin's terms – has been transformed into the reproducibility of death every minute for every minute in the digital of the Internet of contemporary social media. Capturable behaviour is preserved into multiple data archives both public and private, accessible and inaccessible.

The memorialisation effect of these accumulated archives of data, in an 'archiviolithic drive' to use Derrida's (1996, p. 11) words, do not generate either monuments or documents. The archive 'leaves no monument, it bequeaths no document of its own. As inheritance, it leaves only its erotic simulacrum, its pseudonym in painting, its sexual idols, its masks of seduction: lovely impressions. These impressions are perhaps the very origin of what is so obscurely called the beauty of the beautiful. As memories of death' (Derrida, 1996, p. 11).

If the gaze is challenged by looking at the 'manifestation of death in progress' as a fetishist fascination with human mortality,[5] another process in action is the close investigation of internal data that have become externalised. If it is possible to have images of one's own tumour removal recorded on a DVD and played over and over again – as remorse of life's missed possibilities – the images of death also become a living testimonial to existence by memorialising and reprocessing death in progress.[6] The problem is that they are no longer images of something real, but an ontological reality of a curated narrative of the Ego/Hero that refers to the mediated appearance of some other and now impossible to grasp form of real.

The questions that arise now are perhaps even more tantalising: is the digital the ultimate failure in the affirmation of our consciousness? Who will delete the obsolete presence from the various social networks that people belong to which present everyone as constantly alive, constantly engaged and constantly real? And as with Seppukoo[7] – the software that allowed a virtual suicide on Facebook – is there a digital funeral service that would announce to all of one's virtual friends that one is now indeed physically and virtually dead with memories forever lost and no monument left?

The process of becoming immortal or, for that matter, ever present, is one that is achieved through constant uploading in order to have a digital

existence – detached from the real while capturing the real. The problem is that the digital existence is still linked to the life of the physical body and not detached from it.[8] This is unless one could envisage a series of random posts chosen by an algorithm within an existing database and posted automatically even beyond the death of the physical body, so that one's life – unbeknown to most – would continue with a series of announcements of daily functions in Twitter and Facebook: *just had a good bowel movement – many thanks to my digestive system. Like/Dislike. It is a good day for my heart to keep on beating! Comment. Etc.*[9] Unfortunately, etiquette, moral codes and aesthetics do not allow for a bodily representation of death, nor for the display of images of decomposition of the body via Twitter or Facebook, since this would be a definite reality of the aesthetic ugliness of life and a nail in the coffin of the illusion of eternal presence constructed by the narrative of the Ego/Hero incapacitated to control the transformations of the narrative of the body and of the 'real'. It would be a representation of the horror vacui caused by death, which by leaving maggots and *ignis fatuus*, (methane expelled from the body in decomposition), would oblige us to face an Adornian aesthetic ugliness of death outside the realms of aestheticised and domesticated curatorial frameworks.

These systems of forever-presence are already being brought into existence – making fantasy real or a not so distant future possibility, as with the TV episode 'Be Right Back' (2013) of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* series, where it might be possible to cheat death by recreating, with social media, a clone of the deceased partner. The decayed corpse is nowhere to be seen in the TV episode, quickly replaced by a perfect new mirror-living-image, while the grief of permanent loss is substituted with the constant remainder of the inadequacy of the almost perfect replacement.

'When your heart stops beating, you'll keep tweeting', is the slogan of Liveson – your social afterlife. This is a service that is apparently based on artificial intelligence (a problematic use of the term AI by the company). The reality is that the service is based on algorithms that 'analyses your original Twitter feed. Learning about your likes, tastes and syntax. LIVESON will keep tweeting even after you've passed away. But to do that, you need to teach it'.[10] The idea of social media is pushed to the extreme with this artwork by PIPS:lab titled *DieSpace 3.0*.

> What do you want to do when you're dead? Hyves, Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, LinkedIn – it's almost a full-time job keeping up with all these online communities, updating your profile, sending messages and uploading your latest best photos. And now tech-theatre group PiPS:lab wants us to join another one: DieSpace. There is one prerequisite though: you have to be dead to join. Because of the fast 'greyification' of our society, the number of people dying will be increasing rapidly. And dead people don't have a place to socialize yet … PiPS:lab jumped at this great business opportunity and created DieSpace: 'the first active internet community for the diseased'.[11]

A quick search in Google with the keywords 'digital, funeral and service' reveals the site http://www.faqs.org/patents/app/20090112929, a request to patent the

registration of guests to a funeral: a digital funeral book. This project is representative of a strictly digital remediation of content in the context of new media speech and does not keep in mind the implication of content analysis.[12] This is what Marshall McLuhan would have defined as the 'rearview mirror' approach that discounts issues related to the complexity of media as well as the transmediation of content. It re-fabricates existing realities in order to take advantage of contemporary technologies and creates alternative forms of display of loss, memorialising them in every possible available commercial form, including QR codes.[13]

More complex and perhaps more rooted in the possibilities of contemporary new media and social networks is Liveson which may become a future service where one could continue to exist by posting through social networks, emailing parents and loved ones, sending jokes and trivia, publishing small video clips, podcasts and images. It would take a bit of effort and it would have to be planned ahead of time (e.g. a couple of years before dying) – but it could signal a shift in our contemporary society where the activity of networking could continue from beyond the grave, blurring the boundaries of digital life and real death. This could be the first database-driven narcissistic existence that would continue to replicate itself in an uninterrupted love of the 'object'.[14] It could bring a questioning of the validity of social interactions via digital media within a principal and unprincipled capitalistic society based on the exploitation of business niches, ethical or unethical as they might be, and within which every Ego/Hero constructs its narrative independently from mainstream media.[15] Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center in Massachusetts, in an interview with Will Coldwell, warns of the possibility of an interference and a disruption of the current Internet structure with its economically codified needs, including those of death, loss, grief and memory.

> [S]ites such as DeadSocial are a 'digital extension' of people leaving letters to be read after they die. For her, apps that create artificial messages on behalf of the deceased are more problematic. 'What do we do if someone uses this new extension of time in a way that torments or stalks its receivers?' asks Rutledge. 'Death is the ultimate lack of accountability.' And if the future of social media platforms is one haunted by digital ghosts in the machine, would you still log on? (Coldwell, 2013)

Although it could be announced and made clear that there is an existence in the social networks before life and after death,[16] more fascinating is the possibility of not knowing if the interactions we are having are with a 'living' human being or an already dead one (Metaxas & Mustafaraj, 2012, p. 472). The challenges to a capitalistic system epitomised by a software application based on gaining friends – where friends are valuable in economic terms and for personal visibility – could be in the absolute a waste of time in developing interactions in which we are not able to know if we are falling in love, befriending and communicating with somebody that is no longer living. The waste of time equals the waste of money with a revolutionary, aesthetic, cultural and social

component: that of not providing financial or social benefits to any single individual and undermining the solace of the narrative of the Ego/Hero.

In this particular case, a project similar to Liveson could easily become an iPhone app which, within a narcissistic 'me, myself and I' in an Ego/Hero-driven society, could have a certain morbid appeal. Each post could be marked now and/or after – offering the opportunity for the same posts and comments made in life to be archived and re-selected by a digital life-simulator algorithm.

As an economic project, the digital representation of 'dead still alive' would move beyond the remediation approach to old media and focus more on the idea of transmediation as innovation of media-based activities and behaviours. The new perspective offered to the funeral business is no longer that of burying the dead but of keeping the dead alive, transforming the process of burial into a 'digital funeral business' focused on the permanence and eternity of one's digital life and a process of memorialisation that becomes instead a constant process of memory re-creation, re-mapping and re-archiving.[17]

The problematisation of the archival process is also a problematisation of the role of the curator, editors and dissemination/presentation of *The Final Cut* of one's life without bodily functions/dysfunctions, within the 'socially mediated' context of life and death (McManus, 2013, p. 2). *The Final Cut* (2004) is a movie that presents the role of 'cutters' in editing out the unsavoury parts of one's life into a feature-length memorial made from the visuals collected from memory implants that record one's entire life. A process that appears to democratise the rewriting of history was achieved by erasing the memory of adversaries in order to embed one's own properly redacted history over and above the others creating a personal regime of truth. In this context of multiple histories and erasures, Derrida writes in his analysis of the archive that 'if there is no archive without consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorisation, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive' (Derrida, 1996, pp. 11–12).

In light of both Bazin's and Derrida's observation, repetition is the manifestation of contemporary society's death drive caught in between the fearful desire of self-destruction and that of self-eternalisation.

Controversies and examples of new ways of presenting the process of grieving and the moment of death could only abound since they become manifestations of the contradictions of a contemporary system of living, dying, creating, accumulating and memorialising. If the idea of the tele-distance from the dead body sounded provocative, the recent Ebola outbreaks, by imposing a distance from the viral body, have only evidenced the underlining thanatophobia of funeral practices in a capitalistic society where the death of the other cannot affect or reverberate upon one's unique and invaluable personal existence.

The tele-funeral as a pay-on-demand process becomes a viable option, a much better filter than the physical gloves, masks and biological suits, which also highlights the cultural, economic and social differences between a digital

and non-digital world; as well as the threat that a virus as a carrier of indiscriminate death is able to instil in the hierarchical economic existences of self-curating Egos/Heroes. The tele-funeral becomes an option able to satisfy the need to generate distance from the dead body since it is no longer possible for Priam, king of Troy, to wash Hector's dead body.

> From tomorrow, friends and relatives can pay £75 for a password to access a webcast of ceremonies at Southampton Crematorium. Critics claim the pay-per-view service is macabre, but the crematorium's manager insists it presents a logical solution to a common problem. The filming will be done with a small, digital camera set up at the back of the East chapel. For a £75 fee, families will receive a username and password which they can pass on to any-one who cannot attend the ceremony. Mourners can also buy a DVD for £50 and an audio recording for £25. [...] A spokeswoman for Southampton City Council said the fee will cover the costs of running the equipment and uploading the film to the internet. 'It costs about £4000 a year to have the two chapels wired up and when it comes profits, they are negligible,' she added. (Clout, 2008)

Looking at the process of death in contemporary times both from a sociopolitical and sociological perspective, it is evident that the complexity of the phenomenon has increased through the layering of the virtual over the real in a series of hybridised spaces that have moved society from modernity into postmodernity.

Tony Walter (2006, p. 273) attempts in his analysis of the image and contemporary media to construct a framework that allows a return to modernity and 'the values and security associated with it'. The issue is that this is no longer an age of tangible objects and tangible concepts, but an age of ontologically confused, blurred and layered hybridised realities and their phenomenologies that together concur to shape and memorialise the world not as we know it, but as we are conditioned to desire it. The mirror, in Foucauldian terms, is no longer a heterotopia but a homotopia, since the virtual point of the mirror has become real and is both *over there* and *over here*.[18]

The narrative constructed by the Ego/Hero is increasingly disjointed by the body and more and more intertwined with the fetishistic and narcissistic pleasure of the image as self-screened surrogate of immortality and eternal presence.

> 'The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions out-strip his motor capacity, [...] with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more per-fect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition [...] but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject [...] Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image [...] between screen and mirror [in a relationship within which] cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego.' (Mulvey, 2004, pp. 59–60)

The distance accumulated between modernity and postmodernity can be measured via the mirrored images that are constructed of death by the narrative of the Ego/Hero – socially and medially compatible with the requirements of the aesthetics of homologated postmodern representations of *beautiful death*.

Grieving is no longer based on tactile functions and the relationship with the body and its decay. Smells, coldness, permanence and loss are banned in an increasingly detached thanatophobic society within which the body is no longer the focus of our attention. Such attention has instead shifted to the digitally mediated representation of it through the screen. The word and the image of the archive both conspire to 'the dissimulation of the "as such" of death as in its revelation', (Derrida, 1993, p. 76) ensuring a relationship with death and its replay that is based both on presence and absence. The shift has also more radical connotations: death is no longer based on the representation of the loss, but on the replication and repetition of semblances of life as if experiencing a never-ending glitch. It is no longer about pain, but about the avoidance of pain through a digital resemblance of life. Life and death are phenomenologically colliding into a GIF of an automated permanent sequential repetition that needs no rewinding. The sequence in *Minority Report* (2002) where Anderton, played by Tom Cruise, keeps on attempting to touch the digital image of his lost child is perhaps an apt visualisation of this phenomenon.

Telepresence becomes the externalisation tool, which can allow both a personal and a public vision that ensures the permanence of a memorialisation process offered by the thousands, millions or billions of hits of the World Wide Web.

> If the Internet and World Wide Web represent the augmentation of collective memory, then webcameras are a set of wired eyes, a digital extension of the human faculty of vision. (Campanella, 2001, p. 23)

In conclusion: my tumour and I are breaking up

But is it really so? And is it really possible to break up with death and its contemporary digital processes? With the increase of contemporary digital medical imaging, people that are getting ready to undergo surgery to remove a tumoral mass can peruse the MRI images of their own tumour on their laptop.

This process of gaze and engagement is one that is functional to the capitalistic expectation of life as a continuous process of consumption. It is the repeated usage, or more appropriately the *eternalised consumption* of digital images of an announced death in a context of cultural fetishism, people's last attempt to re-affirm life by constantly re-playing the memorialisation of death and disguising the processes of decay and dissolution of the body.[19]

It is the act of the re-affirmation of life – through every possible means – that becomes the object of documentation through the imagery that witness to the struggle of refusing to acknowledge the possibility of death. This is an acknowledgement that would oblige a re-questioning of capitalistic models of living and

repetitions of iconic representations. Life in Western societies can only be life, and death is the eternalisation of the memory to be constantly relived.

> Now that Ebola appears to have the potential to affect Americans, we *really* care. Not about Ebola or the people it's affecting, perse, but mostly about ourselves and whether we are going to die of Ebola. The Internet has been teeming with misinformation, advising people to stay away from keyboards and money. (Hu, 2014)

At a closer analysis, it cannot be affirmed with certainty that the relationship between images as objects representing death and death itself could be defined as a dichotomy. It actually appears to be the opposite, one of continuous engagement, constant *re-mors* (*mors*, after all, is death in Latin) as Bazin might have said, in which the celebration of death becomes a celebration of life, a voyeuristic engagement with the loss in the eternalisation process of a *near death*. The exorcism of death – and disease for that matter – happens increasingly through the digital objectification of and detachment from the tragedy of death.[20]

It is the same detachment that contemporary Western societies have developed between action and consequence. There is no longer responsibility for the action, because the consequence is no longer attributed to the actor. Death is something equally and increasingly distant: there is no longer death because there is no sense of loss since all is already lost – the tele-funeral is the ultimate act of distancing. Tele-death becomes both a presence/absence that requires no emotive investment beyond a minimal investment in words. These words have no sense of lived and experienced loss, in which there is no remorse or *mors*, but only re-mors as replay.

In the words of Eduardo Kac (2001, p. 182), the contemporary world of digital telepresence is a world where both the present and absent have an equivalent value, where the past, present and future merge in an undistinguishable set of data able to conjure at the same time in the user both the feeling of presence and absence.

> In this new art, immediate perceptual encounters are expanded by a heightened awareness of what is absent, remote. Telepresence art shows us that from a social, political, and philosophical point of view, what we cannot see is equally relevant to what meets the eye. (Kac, 2001, p. 182)

The sense of permanence and eternal existence becomes total by repudiating the connection to the phenomenon of death and by allowing a return to existence even if it is only filmic – as in the case of Bazin – or a digital existence. Seppukoo for example allows people to return to their existence in Facebook. The permanence of death and its consequences are eliminated in an attempt to erase the permanence of death and transform it into a process within which there are a re-wind and re-play button.

In fact, once a person has committed Seppukoo, a virtual suicide in Facebook, he or she can:

(1) read all the comments left by your friends in the Memorial Page;
(2) share your Memorial Page using your favourite social network;
(3) reactivate your Facebook account just logging again to Facebook (boo!!!).[21]

Death becomes a joke, a process that can be reversed, rewound, a temporary glitch that can be regretted by reinstating presence. It is an aestheticised permanent status of immortality[22] filled with digital retouches and Hollywoodian glamour that censored, adjusted, edited, formatted and rendered palatable is repeatedly re-played and eternalised. Death is accepted within the twenty-first century as long as it is aesthetically pleasant, digitally enhanced and capitalistically sublime.[23]

The problem is that the illusion of presence and the illusion of a digitally anaesthetised/aestheticised death and the pornographic reality of life and death are not the same. The complexity of *death aesthetics* (Graham, Constable, & Fernando, 2015, p. 33) cannot be limited to the representation of death as 'unpleasant'. Death becomes in the aesthetic and visuality of twenty-first century culture also beauty, threat, political negotiation, glory and self/collective affirmation and denial, but also the ineluctable evidence of the simulacrum of power enforced with death via the accumulation, repetition and memorialisation of the image.

> The worst is that it all becomes a parody of violence, a parody of the war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of the abjection of war which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power. (Baudrillard, 2005a)

The pornography of violence[24] is the *pornography of death* that, by either playing itself or skipping over the censored images,[25] generates ineluctably in the viewer an aesthetic and fetishistic pleasure (Mulvey, 1975), even if it is just the pleasure of feeling alive.

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Disclosure statement

Notes

[1] 'Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map' Baudrillard (1994, p. 1).

[2] 'The Matrix also functions as the "screen" that separates us from the Real, that makes the "desert of the real" bearable. However, it is here that we should not forget the radical ambiguity of the Lacanian Real: it is not the ultimate referent to be covered/gentrified/domesticated by the screen of fantasy – the Real is also and primarily the screen itself as the obstacle that always-already distorts our perception of the referent, of the reality out there' Žižek (2002, p. 250).

[3] 'As Badiou demonstrated apropos of the Stalinist show trials, this violent effort to distil the pure Real from the elusive reality necessarily ends up in its opposite, in the obsession with pure appearance' Žižek (2006, p. 267).

[4] '... Since technology *is* society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools' Castells (1996, p. 5).

[5] 'The fetish is related to death through the terms of castration and fear, to the off-frame in terms of the look, glance, or gaze' Metz (1985, p. 85).

[6] Hoskins (2009, p. 93) writes of 'network memory' and of the archive as a permanent repository but the experience of digital memory processes and archives is neither constantly networked nor permanently available and retrievable in a non-distant future.

[7] Seppukoo website, 'Welcome to Seppukoo/Assisting Your Virtual Suicide,' Seppukoo, http://www.seppukoo.com (accessed January 1, 2011).

[8] With increasingly autonomous networks and larger amounts of data being uploaded, this direct relationship between the body and the archive is being altered, creating autonomous existences of data that feed in Baudrillard's precession of simulacra. 'Networks have no way of distinguishing between the living and the dead, and, as a result, end up treating online data as divorced from the user to which it supposedly belongs. After death, as it becomes difficult or impossible to manage online data, data are positioned as autonomous and beyond the control of the human body' Bollmer (2013, p. 143).

[9] Social media are increasingly filled with personal statements and bodily functions that are shared among users. 'The book Alive, which details their ordeal, describes the conversation that they had concerning each other's bowel movements. Similar situations occur among longtime roommates or couples who live together for many years' Meyrowitz (1985, p. 45).

[10] Liveson, homepage, http://www.liveson.org/connect.php (accessed October 20, 2014).

[11] PIPS:lab, Diespace 3.0, http://www.pipslab.org/projects.php?lang=en&show=7#.VG2x94v vQUU (accessed October 20, 2014). See also: PIPS:lab, 'Diespace: The First Active Internet Community for the Deceased,' http://vimeo.com/48738522 (accessed November 10, 2014) and PIPS:lab at TEDxAmsterdam, *TEDx Talks*, December 10, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApyDSq_DbQo (accessed November 10, 2014).

[12] '... What we call a double logic of *remediation*. Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them' Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 5).

[13] QR Codes on Headstones Offered by Poole Undertakers, *BBC News*, September 06, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-dorset-19506286 (accessed November 10, 2014). See Tony Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, and Pitsillides (2011, p. 276).

[14] 'The compromise which normally concludes this inner struggle consists in transforming the very nature of the feeling for the object, in learning progressively to love this object as dead, instead of continuing to desire a living presence and ignoring the verdict of reality, hence prolonging the intensity of suffering' Metz (1985, p. 85).

[15] Tony Walter (2006) in his attempt to reconstruct a modernist re-interpretation of contemporary media looks at the news and 'media' from a mainstream perspective rather than an audience's interpretation of the report or the audience's creation of alternative reports. Increasingly contemporary post-postmodern media are characterised by personalised interpretations of events in which the audience is no longer a spectator, but an actor and within which each individual 'is' and can act as a small broadcaster.

[16]   In this sense by eliminating mourning, death disappears and therefore there is no longer need to engage with 'the different modes of user participation and cultural expressions performed by bereaved, grief tourists and other agents instead' Karppi (2013, p. 4).

[17]   *Not So Easily* is an artwork by the artist who by positioning a camera in a family tomb will tweet images of the decomposition of family members. The artwork is currently listed in the testament of the artist and copyright and intellectual property rights apply.

[18]   'The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there' Foucault (1984).

[19]   'Rather, cultural fetishism is an effect of a feeling of inadequacy, of relative impotence, provoked by the experience of the power of the state' Stratton (1996, p. 15).

[20]   'The funeral rites which exist in all societies have a double, dialectically articulated signification: a remembering of the dead, but a remembering as well that they are dead, and that life continues for others. Photography, much better than film, fits into this complex psycho-social operation, since it suppresses from its own appearance the primary marks of "livingness"' Metz (1985, p. 85).

[21]   Seppukoo website, How It Works, 'Welcome to Seppukoo/Assisting Your Virtual Suicide,' Seppukoo, http://www.seppukoo.com (accessed January 1, 2011).

[22]   The dichotomy of 'fictional death' and 'real death' proposed by Gibson (2007) appears to be surpassed by the profound intertwining of 'fiction' and 'real', 'virtual' and 'real' in people's daily lives.

[23]   '[T]he skull is not just capitalist art, but, in that it is also rather obviously art about money, it is also an art of the capitalist sublime: an art which presents capital as its unpresentable object of desire' White (2009, p. 156).

[24]   'For the worst thing about this is that here we have a parody of violence, a parody of war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of abjection of a war that is incapable of being merely war, of merely killing, and that is being drawn out into an infantile, Ubuesque "reality show", a desperate simulacrum of power' Baudrillard (2005b, p. 23).

[25]   The video of the killing of a policeman in the Parisian attack to Charlie Hebdo was not shown in its entirety; it had been blurred or had the sequence of the coupe de grace edited out. The edit generated a glitch in the video sequence which was played over and over and over again.

Notes on contributor

Lanfranco Aceti works as an academic, artist and curator and is the founder of the Studium: Lanfranco Aceti Inc., and founder and Director of MoCC (Museum of Contemporary Cuts). He is a visiting professor at New York University and Goldsmiths College, department of Media and Communications, London. He teaches Contemporary Art and Digital Culture at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabanci University, Istanbul, and is Editor in Chief of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac (The MIT Press, Leonardo journal and ISAST). Lanfranco Aceti is specialised in contemporary art, inter-semiotic translations between classic media and new media, contemporary digital hybridisation processes, Avant-garde film and new media studies and their practice-based applications in the field of fine arts.

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