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@#D: Face-Filters, Satisfying Videos and Socio-spatial Justice

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Reflecting on digital poiesis and what can be thought of as 3D phantasmagoria, this paper puts forward some considerations about urban media ecologies, focusing on those that dwell directly on space. Considering visual culture indexes such as Face-Filters and the popularization of material simulation and maximalist neu grunge, computer-aided three-dimensional rendering—and its interlink with decentralized computation—will be seen as new spectra for contemporary geographies.

This text aims to create a discussion for socio-spatial justice revolving as a critique of Platform Capitalism and its ability to render power. Neither as a portal for other worlds or a long-lasting overlay, digitality rays out, glimpses from within the surfaces of material reality having 3D as a language negotiator. If the industrial machinery, the prison, and the screen designed the imaginary and social contracts of western modernity, the biopower of algorithms utilizes all space and users' bodies as quantifiable devices and exploitable resources—feeding augmentations judged desirable.

1. Introduction

Data, sounds, and images [...] invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into reality. They materialize as junkspace, military invasion, and botched plastic surgery. They spread through and beyond networks, they contract and expand, they stall and stumble, they vie, they vile, they wow and woo (Steyerl 2013).

1. First presented at the School of Fine Arts Porto, this is a two-channel video installation. It shows a television screen lying horizontally on the floor of the exhibition space and a tripod set up perpendicularly on top of it. Attached to the tripod, a smartphone is positioned vertically. This series is meant to be reproduced in any pair of screens and different combinations are encouraged. The videos for each channel can be found here: <http://www.130-ivxx.com/23d.html>

This paper stems from a homonymous installation series⁴ and aims to investigate relationships between contemporary cultural production, the economic system it is inserted in, and an expected symbiose responsible for a perceived crisis in material culture in digital turmoil. A wide range of cultural artifacts will be seen having *rendering* and *augmentation* as conceptual keys to address social paradigms. These are seen as central for a critique of capitalism through its geographies, and a current state diagnosed as a digital precarization of space and territories (Badie 1995 in Haesbaert and Bruce 2002).

This analysis is shaped through a non-hegemonic, post-Marxist optic, where we interrogate media praxes and the aesthetics of Capitalist Realism (Fisher 2009). Supported by—and mirrored in—a visual culture of hegemonic-computational characteristics, we recognize logics of semiotic consumption and reproduction that are specific of an operative process of augmentation; of intellect, of body or space (Engelbart 1964; LeBreton 2000; Manovich 2005). However, it is here argued that the dynamic, potent nature of such a term is limited to the capabilities of capitalism itself, in its competences, not the human cogs of its systematic array. Such operates indissociable from a social engineering and cultural narrative that aims to distance the concepts of reality and the real (Zupancic in Fisher 2009), which *render* epistemological frontiers and capture deviating movements through oppression and modulated desire.

Through the term “@#D” we use the coincidence of keys “2” and “3”, “@” e “#” in computer keyboards (US-Int. and PT standards) as a theoretical device to interrogate this extractivist modality of technology: of somatic and cognitive processes that hybridize while numb both two- and three-dimensional spaces (2D, 3D), virtualities, locality (@) and information itself—from the *WWW 2.0 folksonomy* to the barely outdated term *Big Data* (#).

2. @#D, The Confusing State of Things

On the 22nd of December 2019, videos posted by *Watch People Die Inside* on Twitter (@theydeadinside, suspended and cloned in July 2020) call attention, and are described below:

A baby is carried in the arms of a woman close to a store mannequin. The baby smiles and reaches for the inanimate face. At the first touch, the head falls off. Baby cries. [7 seconds];

Mom and baby record a selfie video, both looking at camera and screen seriously. As mom opens a smile, she activates a “smart filter” where eyes, mouth, and nose disappear leaving a blank, rubbery face. Baby cries and screams. [11 seconds].

Similar to the contribution of the Global-North film industry to society in the 20th Century, we observe here technologies of translation and quantification of space and body as structure-territory for numerous contemporary paradigms. This work believes that the current condition of digitization and its implications for data analysis in information sciences ask for a new take on the *Spatial Turn* (as clustered in Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, The Situationist International, Michel de Certeau) in societies of control connected in globalized financial capitalism (Deleuze 1992).

While cinema inaugurates the process of digitization in cultural production in the 1980s and 90s, as a spectacle illustrative to Baudrillard’s simulation (1983), the workplace sees increasing stillness in the cubicle-grid abstraction. The mainstream extent of digital cinematography (CGI, computer-generated imagery) is the final installment of abstract space in culture, which will come to complement the digitization in bureaucratic structures and work relationships until the currently defined 4.0 industry.

Likewise the transition to Web 2.0, in its fertilization through venture capital, we see the introduction of *smartphones* and the *Internet of Things* as a finely orchestrated moment of technological governance which defines Platform Capitalism (Srnicsek 2016). As usual, the early investment in a new economic model anticipates social domination to make sure its financial return. Such control is installed only when we accept a device as support (as done with TVs and PCs) through which attention can be seized. In our proliferating net of *screen-objects* with pluri-dimensional, multi-platform span, a normalization of “a gaze of space-

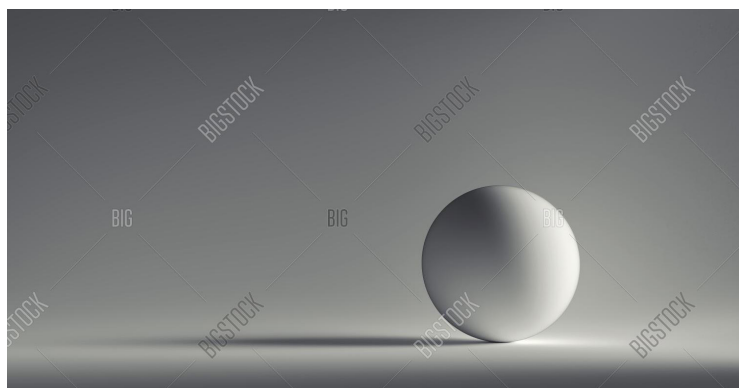
and-screen” (Cohen 2019) seems only a first step in a total apprehension of the sensorial spectra. Often referred to as “popularization” or “democratization”, such implementations have little to do with the interests of the people, as we see their needs and wills are ultimately bypassed.

Since the 1990s, cultural software for special effects, three-dimensional modeling, virtual reality, GPS, leave the one-way exclusivity of the big film studios, and culture becomes permeated by tools of creation and occupation of other “worlds” and second “lives”. When we address 3D, we go further than visual culture towards interactive media, multimedia installations, and spatialized sound. In this transfiguration and acknowledging the material needs (hardware) of such practices, it is concerning to understand which artistic productions work as creators and dissolvers of a 3D *phantasmagoria* (Cohen 2019), a “confusion” in the interlacing of usage and interface, of encounter with artifacts and existence itself, presence in concrete space. This condition is seen as a ghostly offset of what serves as reality in a hauntological system of knowledge.

In the following sections, we will interrogate such an ambiguous social period of accessibility and constraint Nike defines as algorithmic revolution (2016), interested in perceiving to which extent certain cultural objects, often referred to as therapeutical (or mindful), design a subliminal automatization of productivity rather than healing states. In contemporary audio culture as an example, we can analyse the *continuum* of streaming services, an era of ambient music reissues, cloud rap, and “24/7 chill beats to relax to” as serving an underlying tempo for capitalist reproduction.

3. Render Politics

Fig. 1. BIGSTOCK: white on white, ready-made, 2021.



[in] art: represent or depict artistically. [in] computing: process (an outline image) using colour and shading in order to make it appear solid and three-dimensional. (Render, as defined by Oxford Languages and Google)

In bringing rendering operations to social realms and the concept of Realism, one looks at the substitution of embodied experience by an image, an amalgam of projections of something that can be called the *world*. In the politics of rendering, experience takes place in the spatialized visualization of what's not there; a technological update of the modern screen but the maintenance of its ontological trait: "you can see, but you can't touch or have it". Or a step further, in ambisonics and space, "you can listen as-if, but you can't go anywhere".

To access such propositions, Instagram and Youtube and the sky-rocketing Tik Tok will be taken as media for analysis, not only for their expressive number of users and frequency of posts but its algorithmic components. When in 2016, Instagram premiered its stories, it cannibalized not only the interaction model of competitor Snapchat but followed up with what the latest called "selfie stickers" and "geosticker" (now "face-filters" and "geotag").

As these features became extremely popular, they were also targets of pertinent critiques on privacy, the beauty industry, and racial justice for their impact on mental health and increasingly exposed biases. (Elle 2019; Tolentino 2019; Peters 2019; Noble 2018; Silva 2020). As facial recognition becomes a device of capture of identity and affects in a "selfie culture", the apprehension of the face is symbolic to "perceive perceiving", remembering, recognizing, and systematizing other urban agents, human or not. Such *digital physiognomy* and the rise of *deepfakes* become the foremost concern in the practice of identity and it is highly instrumentalized for state enforcement (See *Algorithmic Justice League* and Silva 2020). However seen mostly as a villain, the culture of images has shown to be also an important empowering territory for body-positive stance and aesthetic avant-garde in the LGBTQA+ and BIPOC collectivities, historically destitute of the right to occupy physical and social spaces.² This sort of counter-practice will be brought forward again in the conclusion of this paper as prefigurative examples and experimental media politics.

2. This paper was originally inspired by and honors the work of recently departed SOPHIE, with emphasis on her 2018 music video "Faceshopping". Following her passing, relevant discussions have emerged about the aesthetic landscape and futurity in technology. See Matt Bluemink's series on Anti-Hauntology in Blue Labyrinths and Acid Horizon's Podcast "PC Music, Accelerationism, and Xenofeminism".

Moving away from the face, in diametric opposition, we observe different phenomena of the 3D phantasmagoria, still less popular and subtler. What we call here *satisfying videos* seem to have a strong relationship with personalized suggestions from the algorithms of video platforms in their insistent “explore” section, inhabited in large numbers by automatic profiles (bots) and promoted content (ads).

Opposite to the mirror dynamics of an image of oneself projected to the collective, these videos and ASMRs (Autonomous sensory meridian response) are characterized by an intimately reverse practice of the audiovisual, where content substitutes action, portraying hands and objects constantly. While they refer to a *do-it-yourself* attitude, satisfaction and comfort encapsulated in these media artifacts (loops, process videos, ultra-slow macro photography, and amplified micro-sounds) viewers are fulfilled by the experience of others as theirs (Mulvey 2009). Either through slimes, hyper-elaborated cheesy-melting food porns, life hacks, ... the user rapidly falls in this *fétiche* stream.

Those operate among what Han puts as “The Smooth” (2018b). Be it in live-action or animation, in the aesthetic palette of current graphic design and filmmaking we observe hyper-and-*quasi*-realistic renderings, “kinetic sand”, shiny and reflexive bubbly shapes as a motif. Creative uses of material simulation, eased-in and -out, ultimately aim at challenging our understanding of physical behavior, either by perfectly fitting or breaking expectations (mind-bending/“is it cake?”). Among others, the TV shows like *Nōkabe* (Brain Wall), Sasuke and its western reboot American Ninja Warrior bring an interesting fold to abstract space in television, where a gamified scenographic space feedbacks a learning curve initiated on games such as Pitfall! (1982) and Prince of Persia (1989). In visual effects, Tryptyc’s shiny ball shading technique and ILM’s dynamically animated green-screen technology (as recently featured in Vox’s Design series) are other noticeable examples of virtuality in novel applicabilities.

The persistently hermetic order of the images provided by these virtualities blur the distinction between user-spectator and their environment; to the extent where it doesn’t matter if events even take place, contents are or not real, artificial, truthful or possible, recorded or rendered by a computer. All these instances are in check, while the cognitive reward of seeing and hearing is not.

The operative-ness of algorithmic procedures has a unique role in this social narrative. In opposition to modern images of control in mass media systems, shaped as satisfactory to be forged and disseminated as one, the personalized

flow of content in Platform Capitalism segments the internet. As it collects preferences, it retains itself as a feedback loop of bubbles or echo chambers. Differently from political views or digital activism, satisfying videos and similar media objects are mostly experienced alone, fed in pleasing domesticity, with its reach beyond language, to the core of subjectivities and behaviors of those relating to those systems (Han 2018a).

As a prime example of this intimate spectacle we mention the “Sharpest Knife” series, from user “kiwami japan” on Youtube. Visualizing (instead of carrying out) a perfectly clean kitchen counter and a methodical process are performativities of perfection equivalent to the face-filters and plastic surgeries, which distort domestic and social standards. In this example and others, a common denominator is the level of detail, the high definition, and perfect lighting that *exceeds* the real, giving an almost tacit quality to these images. These triggers for haptic pleasure atomize a teleological confusion effect, the sensation of a mission accomplished, of fine motricity leading to a desirable form. This *voyeurism* (or a neologism for a sound equivalent) contains a tension interfacing the apathetic materiality and the activity portrayed on the glass slab. The annex of this paper brings a mosaic of tags extracted from original posts on Instagram, aiming at illustrating the aesthetic path we reference here.

In this way, the ASMR video functions like a prayer wheel—a doubly interpassive ritual which can run autonomously, without our active participation. Our ambivalence towards the video is echoed also in Gibi’s ambivalence towards the objects. The entire scope of variance in value has been flattened into one dollar (“100 Dollar Store Triggers”). Its intended use is reduced to a single purpose, noise-making (or percussive potential). (Hays n.d.)

4. Augmentation

(...) the space of state control, being for him ‘optical and visual’ (2009b: 234), is not a space in which the body can survive. The body is instead ‘only represented, in a spatial environment reduced to its optical components’ (Lefebvre 2009 in Jones 2013)

In order to expand on how the phenomena listed above relate to production and consumption means of Platform Capitalism, *augmentation* becomes the operation at hand, in its role of providing prompt manifestations of media and goods. The encapsulated and granular format of the videos we observed is seen here as having an intense relationship with the transition from an early

industrial productive society to the (perceived) absence of a final product. In this model, the immaterial component of profit is key to analyze its ability to intervene materially in urban territories, the spatial quality and the experience of individuals in this neoliberal space made augmented.

Following a psychoanalytic thread of Marx and Žižek highlighted by Lib Hays in “The Non-Relation in ASMR and ‘Satisfying’ videos” (n.d., 3), we see a possible pathology of the “weirdly satisfying” as interpassive obsessive-compulsion, driven by capitalist alienation. When we consume images of hydraulic presses, chemical reactions, compilations of fast workers, deep-cleanings, we reiterate the distance of product and process, resource and commodity, reality and beyond-reality (fiction).

As material conditions remain precarious for most and living spaces ever more utilitarian in the urban centers, they are normalized and remediated in a palliative manner. Rendering and augmentation form societal noise, where media systems do not come out as solutions to common problems, but in creating and commercializing the non-essential as the bare expected normal. These so-called platforms show themselves more paralyzing than supportive of a step further, less of a safe stable *altiplano* than an exiled island in cosmic emptiness.

Decentralized computation is seen here as the hauntological *milieu* in which Fisher puts forward as *Capitalist Realism* (2009), a hazy horizon of possibilities other than capitalism as it presents itself. Instead of the purity a cloud metaphor can render, current conditions appear more as a thick fog where few own the navigational instruments. Luke Munn proposes a question that we can take as ours: “how does an algorithmic procedure attain and exert power?” (2018). On their study case Uber, says “the forces exerted by the ‘merely’ technical operations of the algorithmic—storing, searching, indexing, presenting—must accumulate into meta-operations: encapsulating life, enlisting subjects, remaking space, and enchanting users.” (Ibid.)

Before 2020 and a novel spatial urban condition brought by the COVID-19 outbreak, the usage of services such as Google Maps, Uber, AirBnb, Glovo—digital market systems based in locative media—has been justified by the possibility of doing more with less investment, of augmentation of capabilities or exertion of power in less time. This logic of “don’t work harder, work smarter” (at the expense of others) shapes contemporary liberalism and evokes colonial pasts and a face of Social Darwinism that echo from the Global-North since the 14th century.

Among the *crescendo* of social movements in 2020 such as Anti-Racism and Women's Rights, it is of special interest for us to fight for Gig Workers' and App Workers' Rights, with unionization efforts looking for better working conditions and payment. After their work rose to the forefront amid the (still ongoing) measures for containing 'The Virus', the situation of frontline and essential workers such as messengers and stock-workers brought new meaning to the concept of *hyperlocality* (Hochman, Manovich and Yazdani 2014; Hu et al. 2013), both in cooperative and coercive ways. Though mutual aid groups and Uber drivers used geolocation and computer vision to assure a series of needs during the pandemic and have helped each other assemble, these have worked vigorously as control mechanisms in the all-out workplace. Justified as social distancing measures, Uber and Amazon workers would get notified or punished if clustered; a device coming hand in hand with the companies' anti-unionizing guidelines (see Antunes 2020).

Through productivist digital facilitation, Capital keeps its individual enchantment, where the search for self-optimization sets other potencies of the establishment in motion. The constant technological reconfiguration seems to always remediate haptic constraints that its own poiesis hijacks. This contradiction tangents Byung-Chul Han's thesis in "Psychopolitics" (2017), of a fold in the biopolitics it draws from. "Smart power", instead of prohibiting and enclosing, asks for more; "the operative technology of power does not negate or repress freedom so much as exploit it." (Ibid.). The materiality of coercive power over bodies in disciplinary societies sees in digital nature not a de-materialization, but an opportunity to parasite space itself as it transits between devices and manifests precisely. Groy's gives us a conclusion useful both for media and concomitant exercises of power: "Our experience of contemporaneity is defined not so much by the presence of things to us as spectators, but rather by the presence of our virtual souls to the gaze of the hidden spectator." (2016)

5. Conclusions

What happens when fiction (itself) propagates, contaminating the Real? [...] What happens, to fiction [...] when the relation between the Real and its simulations is cybernetically reconfigured? (Fisher [1999] 2018)

The more these augmentations are judged desirable, the more we are confronted with the inherently contradictory action of seeking ethical consumption under capitalism. If on one side, there is an urgency in reshaping economic and legislative structures, there is also an underlying philosophical friction to be resolved.

The search here is for a political philosophy that works directly on such an over-cast view of the experience a community wants to be part of, what this community even is, or, more importantly, *comes into being*. The economic process of western society has weakened community literacy, individual agency becoming withered by a crisis in the production of subjectivity. Such a composite condition is often referred to as “suffocation” and “migraines” in Berardi’s latest writings (2019a, 2020), due to a collective confrontation with the problem of time: “When it is said that time is ending, this does not mean abstract, empty time, but rather liveable time (Garcés 2017).

Views that aim to reconfigure this status quo are faced with a force-field between aesthetics and process that concerns the very question of time while discussing reality and fiction. As seen in Accelerationist writing, a cybernetic approach to these has a contingent of simplification, a tendency to fall under the same mistakes 1950s cybernetic theorists have in describing a “self-regulating ecosystem” or a pessimistic acceleration towards the end. While a clear path for the heavily debated “new materialisms” is still unknown, we argue there is an urgency for digital culture studies to dislocate their framework and attach to intersectionalities, post- and decolonial thought as an escape from the very structure the first was founded on. To recall Arthur C. Clarke’s quote “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”, our conclusions could be of denial of all magic until our historical materialism can have its turn in interrogating the pace of technology — or until the magicity of native communities and a pre-colonial world would be taken in consideration when steering the behemoth concept of technology.

3. As an overview of prominent artists see: [Ines Alpha](#), [Jennifer Mehigan](#), [Michael Staniak](#), [James Merry](#), [Dirk Koy](#), [Johanna Jaskowska](#), [Maxim Zhestkov](#), [Lucas Gutierrez's Cyberia 2021](#), [Bruno Sarttori](#), [Cool 3D World](#), [CTM 2020](#), [by VOJD](#), [Jon Noorlander](#), [Gabriel Massan](#), [Serafim Mendes](#), [Caio Reis](#), [Rimbawan Gerilya](#).

However, in the realm of the graspable, we see in *digital maximalism* a tool equally powerful in today’s counter-culture, guiding experimental modes of existence to be taken in consideration in finding alternatives. Taking the music industry and the club scenes as subjects, we can analyze *Deconstructed Club* and *Avant-Garde Pop* as frantic takes on helplessness. Heavy users of 3D rendering,³ this new popular music seems to reveal all the restlessness this text sees in dealing with space and liberty under a digital dualism. In a nutshell, the music lashes warped vocals, melodic crystal reverbs, compressed ambiences, and hyper-sped algo-glitchy reworks of what Fisher saw in 2010s as euphoric pop (Barrow 2011; Fisher 2014).

Fig. 2. *Untitled*, from MS Paint 3D 2018 series, Che F. Kirk, 2018.



A good party is, among other things, an affront to capitalism. It can provide a collective escape from drudgery, a sanctuary from oppression, a chance to transcend. It revives our utopian imaginations. A good party has elements of prefiguration, glimpses into a better future; it gets you high on hope. (Rosa 2021)

The aural chaos of today's music can only be accessed when acknowledged together with the technocratic socio-economics described above, from which these subgenres emerge: that of a global mental health crisis and socialized anxiety. In our age, the trope femininity of pop stardom has transformed into non-binary and transgender icons that have nothing of hauntological. In their affirmative presence, artists like Linn da Quebrada and Arca disregard promises of the past while giving a new sense of futurity, one shaped by those who historically are the first to experience 'cancelled futures'.

It is no news to say that grassroots organizations in LGBTQA+ and other marginalized communities have a strong sense of mutual aid and care (see 'The Care Manifesto' 2020). These provide not only a collectivized remedy for material precarity, but a vernacular practice of mental healthcare for those deemed deviant and often denied kinship from their own family. The cultural potency of these communities help shape a media ecology that escapes the neoliberal subject, new circuits of the real that consider arts as means but also a colonizing, limiting infrastructure, therefore always put into question. The digital then avoids being seen through a technocratic cannon, but that of hacking and

cyborgianism, a recombination and deformation of digital reproduction. Through amplified bodies, the encounter is a post-screen technology that emancipates us from the distinction of body and thought. They form a critical mass activating spaces and proposing an ecology of dialogs. *Techné* is not at center stage but *poiesis*, in re-territorializing processes of being, trans-formatting and opening relational surfaces on a web made halt.

6. Annex

#balloon #bubble #bubbly #sphere #glassy # #cgi #3d #3dart #satisfy #satisfying #oddlysatisfying #satisfyingsounds #relax #relaxing #relaxation #amazing #chill #asmr #digitaldesign #acidgraphics #3dinspiration #3drender #3darchive #3dgraphics #3dartist #digitalarchive #chrometype #3dartwork #foodporn #cookies #awesome #perfect #tutorial #blogger #nice #hairstyle #style #makeup #nail #foodietutorial #colorful #diy #diyvideos #diyfuture #diyfashion #diycraft #diyvideo #diyfood #lifehacks #awesome #delicious #creative #soyummy #ideas #tips #tasty #howto #desserts #chefclub #foodgram #cooking #tweegram #usa #melting #kitchen #incredible #timelapse #blossom #cake #diyslme #diymakeup #diygift #diygifts #diyqueen #diyproject #5mincrafts #doityourself #cool #good #crafts #diylife #diyblogger #diyideas #withlove #heart #decor #dicas #homedecor #bedroom #display #hola #cute #pink #videodiy #lamp #joy #nifty #save-money #moneysaver #stylish #slime #slimetutorial #crunchy #slimeusa #fluffyslmetutorial #waterslime #asmr #kwai #slimevideo #soft #slimef4f #slimeislife #slimeyhoez #prettyslme #basicslime #slimekit #slimekoreaç #viralposts #oddlysatisfyingvideo #satisfyingposts #satisfyingvid #satisfyingvids #satisfyingpost #satisfyingslimevideos #satisfyingfood #satisfying-content #satisfyingart #satisfyingsoap #satisfyingslimevideo #satisfyingfoam #satisfyingvideosdaily #fastworkers #tech #techdeck #techies #techworld #techie #techhouse #technews #techtrends #techlife #technics #technologies #techgadgets #technologynews #technologytrends #smarttechnology #newtechnology #technologyrocks #technologyfacts #technology #technologysolutions #mechanicaleducation #engineering #engineeringpost #electricalgram #specializedtools

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