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Failure Notice

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- By: [Mark Nunes](#)
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Amongst the hundreds of emails that made their way to error@media-culture.org.au over the last ten months, I received the following correspondence:

Failure notice

Hi. This is the qmail-send program at sv01.wadax.ne.jp.

I'm afraid I wasn't able to deliver your message to the following addresses.

This is a permanent error; I've given up. Sorry it didn't work out.

<namewithheld@s.vodafone.ne.jp>:

210.169.171.135 does not like recipient.

Remote host said: 550 Invalid recipient:

<namewithheld@s.vodafone.ne.jp>

Giving up on 210.169.171.135.

Email of this sort marks a moment that is paradoxically odd and all too familiar in the digital exchanges of everyday life. The failure message arrives to tell me something “didn’t work out.” This message shows up in my email account looking no different from any other correspondence—only this one hails from the system itself, signalling a *failure to communicate*. Email from the “mailer-daemon” calls attention to both the logic of the post that governs email (a “letter” sent to an intended address at the intention of some source) and the otherwise invisible logic of informatic protocols, made visible in the system failure of a “permanent error.”

In this particular instance, however, the failure notice is itself a kind of error. I never emailed namewithheld@s.vodafone.ne.jp—and by the mailer-daemon’s account, such a person does not exist. It seems that a spammer has exploited an email protocol as a way of covering his tracks: when a deliver-to path fails, the failure notice bounces to a third site. The failure notice marks the successful execution of a qmail protocol, but its arrival at our account is still a species of error.

In most circumstances, error yields an invalid result. In calculation, error marks a kind of misstep that not only corrupts the end result, but all steps following the error. One error begets others. But as with the failure notice, error often marks not only the misdirections of a system, but also the system’s internal logic. The failure notice corresponds to a specific category of error—a *potential* error that the system must predict before it has *actually* occurred. While the notice signals failure (permanent error), it does so within the successful, efficient operation of a communicative system. What is at issue, then, is less a matter of whether or not error occurs than

a system's ability to handle error as it arises. Control systems attempt to close themselves off to error's misdirections. If error signals a system failure, the "failure notice" of error foregrounds the degree to which in "societies of control" every error is a *fatal* error in that Baudrillardian sense—a failure that is subsumed in the operational logic of the system itself (40).

Increasingly, the networks of a global marketplace require a rationalisation of processes and an introduction of informatic control systems to minimise wastage and optimise output. An informatic monoculture expresses itself through operational parameters that define communication according to principles of maximum transmission. In effect, in the growing dominance of a network society, we are witnessing the transcendence of a social and cultural system that must suppress at all costs *the failure to communicate*. This global communication system straddles a paradoxical moment of maximum exchange and maximum control. With growing frequency, social and commercial processes are governed by principles of quality assurance, what Lyotard defined nearly thirty years ago as a "logic of maximum performance" (xxiv). As Six Sigma standards migrate from the world of manufacturing to a wide range of institutions, we find a standard of maximum predictability and minimum error as the latest coin of the realm. Utopia is now an error-free world of 100% efficiency, accuracy, and predictability.

This lure of an informatic "monoculture" reduces communication to a Maxwell's demon for capturing transmission and excluding failure. Such a communicative system establishes a regime of signs that thrives upon the drift and flow of a network of signifiers, but that affirms its power as a system in its voracious incorporation of signs within a chain of signification (Deleuze and Guattari 111-117). Error is cast out as abject, the scapegoat "condemned as that which exceeds the signifying regime's power of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 117). Deleuze and Guattari describe this self-cycling apparatus of capture as "a funeral world of terror," the terror of a black-hole regime that ultimately depends upon a return of the same and insures that everything that circulates communicates...or is cast off as abject (113). This terror marks a relation of control, one that depends upon a circulation of signs but that also insists all flows fall within its signifying regime. To speak of the "terror of information" is more than metaphorical to the extent that this forced binary (terror of signal/error of noise) imposes a kind of violence that demands a rationalisation of all singularities of expression into the functionalities of a quantifiable system. To the extent that systems of information imply systems of control, the violence of information is less metaphor than metonym, as it calls into high relief the scapegoat error—the abject remainder whose silenced line of flight marks the trajectory of the unclean.

This cybernetic logic of maximum performance demands that error is either contained within the predictable deviations of a system's performance, or nullified as outlying and asignifying. Statistics tells us that we are best off ignoring the outlier. This logic of the normal suggests that something very risky occurs when an event or an instance falls outside the scope of predicable variance. In the ascendancy of information, error, deviance, and outlying results cast a long shadow. In Norbert Wiener's account of informatic entropy, this drift from systematic control marked a form of evil—not a Manichean evil of bad actors, but rather an Augustinian evil: a falling away from the perfection of order (34-36). Information utopia banishes error as a kind of evil—an aberration that is decidedly off the path of order and control. This cybernetic logic functions at all levels, from social systems theory to molecular biology. Our diseases are now described as errors in coding, transcription, or transmission—genetic anomalies, cancerous loop

scripts, and neurochemical noise. Mutation figures as an error in reproduction—a straying from faithful replication and a falling away from the Good of order and control.

But we should keep in mind that when we speak of “evil” in the context of this cybernetic logic, that evil takes on a specific form. It is the evil of the *errant*. Or to put it another way: it is the evil of the *Sesame Street* Muppet, Bert.

In 2001, a U.S. high school student named Dino Ignacio created a graphic of the Muppet, Bert, with Osama bin Laden—part of his humorous Website project, “Bert is Evil.” A Pakistani-based publisher scanning the Web for images of bin Laden came across Ignacio’s image and, apparently not recognising the *Sesame Street* character, incorporated it into a series of anti-American posters. According to Henry Jenkins’s account of the events, in the weeks that followed, “CNN reporters recorded the unlikely sight of a mob of angry protestors marching through the streets chanting anti-American slogans and waving signs depicting Bert and bin Laden” (1-2). As the story of the Bert-sighting spread, new “Bert is evil” Websites sprang up, and Ignacio found himself the unwitting centre of a full-blown Internet phenomenon. Jenkins finds in this story a fascinating example of what he calls convergence culture, the blurring of the line between consumer and producer (3). From a somewhat different critical perspective, Mark Poster reads this moment of misappropriation and misreading as emblematic of global networked culture, in which “as never before, we must begin to interpret culture as multiple cacophonies of inscribed meanings as each cultural object moves across cultural differences” (11). But there is another moral to this story as well, to the extent that the convergence and cacophony described here occur in a moment of error, an errant slippage in which signification escapes its own regime of signs. The informatic (Augustinian) evil of Bert the Muppet showing up at an anti-American rally in Pakistan marks an event-scene in which an “error” not only signifies, but in its cognitive resonance, begins to amplify and replicate. At such moments, the “failure notice” of error signals a creative potential in its own right—a communicative context that escapes systemic control.

The error of “evil Bert” introduces noise into this communicative system. It is abject information that marks an *aberration* within an otherwise orderly system of communication, an error of sorts marking an errant line of flight. But in contrast to the trance-like lure of 100% efficiency and maximum performance, is there not something *seductive* in these instances of error, as it draws us off our path of intention, leading us astray, pulling us toward the unintended and unforeseen? In its breach of predictable variance, error gives expression to the *erratic*. As such, “noise” marks a species of error (abject information) that, by failing to signify within a system, simultaneously marks an opening, a *poiesis*. This asignifying poetics of “noise,” marked by these moments of errant information, simultaneously refuses and exceeds the cybernetic imperative to communicate.

This poetics of noise is somewhat reminiscent of Umberto Eco’s discussion of Claude Shannon’s information theory in *The Open Work*. For Shannon, the gap between signal and selection marks a space of “equivocation,” what Warren Weaver calls “an undesirable ... uncertainty about what the message was” (Shannon and Weaver 21). Eco is intrigued by Shannon’s insight that communication is always haunted by equivocation, the uncertainty that the message received was the signal sent (57-58). Roland Barthes also picks up on this idea in *S/Z*, as N. Katherine Hayles notes in her discussion of information theory and post-structuralism (46). For these

writers, equivocation suggests a creative potential in entropy, in that noise is, in Weaver's words, "spurious information" (Shannon and Weaver 19). Eco elaborates on Shannon and Weaver's information theory by distinguishing between *actual* communication (the message sent) and its virtuality (the possible messages received). Eco argues, in effect, that communication *reduces* information in its desire to actualise signal at the expense of noise. In contrast, poetics *generates* information by sustaining the equivocation of the text (66-68).

It is in this tension between capture and escape marked by the scapegoats of error and noise that I find a potential for a contemporary poetics within a global network society. Error reveals the degree to which everyday life plays itself out within this space of equivocation. As Stuart Moulthrop addressed nearly ten years ago, our frequent encounters with "Error 404" on the Web calls attention to "the importance of not-finding": that error marks a path in its own right, and not merely a misstep. Without question, this poetics of noise runs contrary to a dominant, cybernetic ideology of efficiency and control. By paying attention to drift and lines of flight, such erratic behaviour finds little favour in a world increasingly defined by protocol and predictable results. But note how in its attempt to capture error within its regime of signs, the logic of maximum performance is not above recuperating the Augustinian evil of error as a form of "fortunate fall." Even in the Six Sigma world of 100% efficiency, does not corporate R & D mythologise the creative moment that allows error to turn a profit? Post-It Notes® and Silly Putty® present two classic instances in which happenstance, mistake, and error mark a moment in which "thinking outside of the box" saves the day. Error marks a kind of deviation from—and within—this system: a "failure" that at the same time marks a potential, a virtuality. Error calls attention to its etymological roots, a going astray, a wandering from intended destinations. Error, as errant heading, suggests ways in which failure, mutation, spurious information, and unintended results provide creative openings and lines of flight that allow for a reconceptualisation of what can (or cannot) be realised within social and cultural forms.

While noise marks a rupture of signification, it also operates within the framework of a cybernetic imperative that constantly attempts to capture the flows that threaten to escape its operational parameters. As networks become increasingly social, this logic of rationalisation and abstraction serves as a dialectical enclosure for an information-based culture industry. But error also suggests a strategy of misdirection, getting a result back other than what one expected, and in doing so turns the cybernetic imperative against itself. "Google-bombing," for example, creates an informatic structure that plays off of the creative potential of equivocation. Here, error of a Manichean sort introduces noise into an information system to produce unexpected results. Until recently, typing the word "failure" into the search engine Google produced as a top response George Bush's Webpage at www.whitehouse.gov. By building Webpages in which the text "failure" links to the U.S. President's page, users "hack" Google's search algorithm to produce an errant heading. The cybernetic imperative is turned against itself; this strategy of misdirection enacts a "fatal error" that evokes the logic of a system to create an opening for *poeisis*, play, and the unintended.

Information networks, no longer secondary to higher order social and cultural formations, now define the function and logic of social space itself. This culture of circulation creates equivalences by way of a common currency of "information," such that "viral" distribution defines a social event in its own right, regardless of the content of transmission. While a decade

earlier theorists speculated on the emergence of a collective intelligence via global networks, the culture of circulation that has developed online would seem to indicate that “emergence” and circulation are self-justifying events. In the moment of equivocation—not so much beyond good and evil, but rather in the spaces between signal and noise—slippage, error, and misdirection suggest a moment of opening in contrast to the black hole closures of the cybernetic imperative. The violence of an informatic monoculture expresses itself in this moment of insistence that whatever circulates signifies, and that which cannot communicate must be silenced. In such an environment, we would do well to examine these failures to communicate, as well as the ways in which error and noise seduce us off course. In contrast to the terror of an eternal return of the actual, a poetics of noise suggests a virtuality of the network, an opening of the possible in an increasingly networked society.

The articles in this issue of *M/C Journal* approach error from a range of critical and social perspectives. Essays address the ways in which error marks both a misstep and an opening. Throughout this issue, the authors address error as both abject and privileged instance in a society increasingly defined by information networks and systems of control.

In our feature article, “Revealing Errors,” Benjamin Mako Hill explores how media theorists would benefit from closer attention to errors as “under-appreciated and under-utilised in their ability to reveal technology around us.” By allowing errors to *communicate*, he argues, we gain a perspective that makes invisible technologies all the more visible. As such, error provides a productive moment for both interpretive and critical interventions.

Two essays in this issue look at the place of error and noise within the work of art. Rather than foregrounding a concept of “medium” that emphasises clear, unimpeded transmission, these authors explore the ways in which the errant and unintended provide for a productive aesthetic in its own right. Using Shannon’s information theory, and in particular his concept of equivocation, Su Ballard’s essay, “Information, Noise, and et al.’s ‘maintenance of social solidarity-instance 5,” explores the productive error of noise in the digital installation art of a New Zealand artists’ collective. Rather than carefully controlling the viewer’s experience, et al.’s installation places the viewer within a field of equivocation, in effect encouraging misreadings and unintended insertions. In a similar vein, Tim Barker’s essay, “Error, the Unforeseen, and the Emergent: The Error of Interactive Media Art” examines the productive error of digital art, both as an expression of artistic intent and as an emergent expression within the digital medium. This “glitch aesthetic” foregrounds the errant and uncontrollable in any work of art. In doing so, Barker argues, error also serves as a measure of the virtual—a field of potential that gestures toward the “unforeseen.”

The virtuality of error provides a framework of sorts for two additional essays that, while separated considerably in subject matter, share similar theoretical concerns. Taking up the concept of an asignifying poetics of noise, Christopher Grant Ward’s essay, “Stock Images, Filler Content, and the Ambiguous Corporate Message” explores how the stock image industry presents a kind of culture of noise in its attempt to encourage equivocation rather than control semiotic signal. By producing images that are more virtual than actual, visual filler provides an all-too-familiar instance of equivocation as a field of potential and a Derridean citation of undecidability. Adi Kuntsman takes a similar theoretic tack in “‘Error: No Such Entry’: Haunted

Ethnographies of Online Archives.” Using a database retrieval error message, “no such entry,” Kuntsman reflects upon her ethnographic study of an online community of Russian-Israeli queer immigrants. Error messages, she argues, serve as informatic “hauntings”—erasures that speak of an online community’s complex relation to the construction and archiving of a collective history.

In the case of a database retrieval error—as in the mailer-daemon’s notice of the “550” error—the failure of an address to respond to its hailing calls attention to a gap between query and expected response. This slippage in control is, as discussed above, an instance of an Augustinian error. But what of the Manichean—the intentional engagement in strategies of misdirection? In Kimberly Gregson’s “Bad Avatar! Griefing in Virtual Worlds,” she provides a taxonomy of aberrant behaviour in online gaming, in which players distort or subvert orderly play through acts that violate protocol. From the perspective of many a gamer, griefing serves no purpose other than annoyance, since it exploits the rules of play to disrupt play itself. Yet in “Amazon Noir: Piracy, Distribution, Control,” Michael Dieter calls attention to “how the forces confined as exterior to control (virality, piracy, noncommunication) regularly operate as points of distinction to generate change and innovation.” The Amazon Noir project exploited vulnerabilities in Amazon.com’s Search Inside!™ feature to redistribute thousands of electronic texts for free through peer-to-peer networks. Dieter demonstrates how this “tactical media performance” challenged a cybernetic system of control by opening it up to new and ambiguous creative processes.

Two of this issue’s pieces explore a specific error at the nexus of media and culture, and in keeping with Hill’s concept of “revealing errors,” use this “glitch” to lay bare dominant ideologies of media use. In her essay, “Artificial Intelligence: Media Illiteracy and the SonicJihad Debacle in Congress,” Elizabeth Losh focuses on a highly public misreading of a *Battlefield 2* fan video by experts from the Science Applications International Corporation in their testimony before Congress on digital terrorism. Losh argues that Congress’s willingness to give audience to this misreading is a revealing error in its own right, as it calls attention to the anxiety of experts and power brokers over the control and distribution of information. In a similar vein, in Yasmin Ibrahim’s essay, “The Emergence of Audience as Victims: The Issue of Trust in an Era of Phone Scandals,” explores the revealing error of interactive television gone wrong. Through an examination of recent BBC phone-in scandals, Ibrahim explores how failures—both technical and ethical—challenge an increasingly interactive audience’s sense of trust in the “reality” of mass media.

Our final essay takes up the theme of mutation as genetic error. Martin Mantle’s essay, “‘Have You Tried Not Being a Mutant?’: Genetic Mutation and the Acquisition of Extra-ordinary Ability,” explores “normal” and “deviant” bodies as depicted in recent Hollywood retellings of comic book superhero tales. Error, he argues, while signalling the birth of superheroic abilities, marks a site of genetic anxiety in an informatic culture. Mutation as “error” marks the body as scapegoat, signalling all that exceeds normative control.

In each of these essays, error, noise, deviation, and failure provide a context for analysis. In suggesting the potential for alternate, unintended outcomes, error marks a systematic misgiving of sorts—a creative potential with unpredictable consequences. As such, error—when given its space—provides an opening for artistic and critical interventions.

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