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Nina Salvatore  
*Vassar College*

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Vassar College

On Digitality: From Spectacular Narcissism to a Deepened Granularity of Perception

by

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Class of 2021

Vassar College Department of Political Science

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May 2021

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## Introduction

### **Situational Context: COVID-19 and Consequent Increases in Digitality**

Digitality has a way of subsuming the everyday through its smooth, addictive design and algorithmic feeding of media. Uninterrogated acceptance of the role of digitality in everyday life (through mobile phones, computers, streaming sites, etc.) reduces the intense textural grains of life into flat digital images and sound bites. As the COVID-19 pandemic began ripping through the United States in early March 2020, I found myself at my parents' home in suburban New Jersey. While spending more time inside the walls of my house than ever before, supplemented only by my work as a cashier at a liquor store down the street, I recorded my encounters of how people were perceiving and feeling effects of living more digitally and less physically connected to people than ever before. I sought to deepen my understanding of how interactions with and through the digital were informing habits of smoothed, efficient and productive interactions, ones that eliminated asperity and friction.

This thesis is not focused on COVID-19, but distinctly enveloped in and with the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications on sociality and digital usage. For instance, use of video conferencing applications like Zoom, which had a jump from 10 million users in Dec 2019 to 300 million users by May 2020, has shifted how many people communicate with friends, colleagues, and even the public. This thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive look into digital technologies and surveillance, but rather a complication of how everyday relations between human beings and digital apparatuses are understood. In what follows I use the term 'digitality' to designate experiences and relations to mechanical apparatuses, insofar as they are normatively constituted. Aspects of digitality

include near continuous connection with people around the globe through mobile smart phones, search engines such as Google, social media sites like Twitter and Instagram. My use of digitality also accounts for computers, smart watches, and televisions as apparatuses that users interact with regularly.

### **Problematization: Crisis of Flattened Perception and Spectacular Narcissism**

Digitality gives users a sense that endless ‘publics’ are being open to them and that endless connections are made possible through it. As digitality and neoliberalism favor smooth, efficient communication and action, problems arise in how people understand disagreement and adversity. Through steady invasions, people who use digital apparatuses’ conceptions of themselves and their identities have been affected and influenced by an increased proliferation of media that centers “the self”. Additionally, digitality situates visual media as primary, especially digital images, which pixelate and smoothen the complexities of the social world into commodifiable boxes and quippy tweets. By reducing users to their data, digitality has essentializing effects. In what follows, I develop a concept called ‘spectacular narcissism’ which builds from feminist and psychological understandings of narcissism to include Guy Debord’s theorization of ‘the spectacle’. Working to resist ‘spectacular narcissism’, this critique conceptualizes ‘friendship’ as a way of understanding linkages within communities across differences through affinity.

Between the aspects of control encouraged by digitality, the 24/7 extraction of users’ data, and the way that the Internet cajoles users into sharing their thoughts as they have them, we, people living in the digital age, are in a generalized crisis of perception and spectacular narcissism. Appreciation for asperity, friction, and idle time can aid users

in slowing down the speed at which they consume and spectate, instead supporting them in fine-tuning the granularity of their perception. Reattunement to the grains of life is important in users perceiving how interconnected they are with the world, sentient and non-sentient. When loved ones are held at physical distances from one another, such as in the COVID-19 pandemic, how can the ubiquity of digitality as a means through which to close this gap be managed? What modes of pleasure, protest, and collectivity are possible when situated in image-based digital worlds that proliferate spectacular narcissism? As total refusals of digitality are untenable under current conditions, to what extent is it possible to subvert the ills of digitality and make space for art and collectivity?

### **The Stakes: Thinking Critically of Digital as a way of Bringing Feeling and Thinking Together**

Thinking critically about digitality the way I do, this thesis sheds light on how smoothness is not only a characteristic of the digital apparatus' physicality, but that communication *via* the digital is smoothed out. When we perceive granularly, we share and feel deeply with our kin, other humans and non-humans. We feel how we affect and are affected, and it emboldens us to live a life of collectivity. Although relations between the flesh and the digital are coercive, addictive, and extractive, how these relations take place can be somewhat renegotiated through an attunement to the granularities of perception and development of affective skills.

The goal of this thesis is to deepen understandings of and to problematize how digitality absorbs so much of everyday life. More so than how sites like Instagram and Netflix monopolize users' time, this critique is focused on the *dividualizing* effects of digitality, as put forth by Gilles Deleuze. Thinking critically about how digitality

mediates relations between people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century aims to make visible relations and opportunities for negotiation within said relations that would otherwise remain hidden. In the introduction of *A Postcapitalistic Politics*, J.K. Gibson-Graham write, “we are generally not conscious of our pervasive styles, that is, ‘how we deal with our selves and things in our everyday coping’ (Spinoza, Flores, and Dreyfus 1997, 17) and certainly not of most of our ways of bringing feeling and thinking together to produce more thinking and feeling” (Gibson-Graham xxix). By becoming more conscious of “our pervasive styles” of living digitality, it is my hope that we, anyone with Internet access, can make decisions informed by our attunement to our embodiedness with(in) the world. In practice, this work might look like cultivating an openness to unpredictable connections, being open to where we might find linkages and where we can be a link between others, in unpredictable situations.

### **Key concepts**

In what follows, I offer some preliminary understandings of concepts that will reoccur and develop throughout the thesis. Key concepts to this problematization of how digitality flattens the grains of perception include the following: granularity, spectacular narcissism, conviviality, and friendship. The importance of using a term like ‘granularity’ is to encapsulate a multidimensional concept, that includes the senses, a sense of relief and depth rather than flatness, a different experience of embodiment, of humanness, a different temporality perhaps, and different affect. Using the term ‘spectacular narcissism’ weaves together narcissistic behavior, as understood by feminist theorists and psychologists, and Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle to understand how digitality,



that centers the individual as a user, proliferates feelings of entitlement and an excessive need to be admired.

The idea of convivial tools and coercive tools, as put forth by Ivan Illich, aids the analysis of human beings' relationships with various tools they interact with. Tools are intrinsic to social relationships, as members of a society relate to each other through the use of tools that they master. Illich's conceptions of conviviality and coercion inform this critique of relations between human beings and digitality. Conviviality connotes the opposite of industrial productivity and signifies that a given tool is one for a person to work with, rather than a tool that 'works' for them (Illich 1973, 11). To Illich, mastery of a tool (possible with convivial tools) makes it possible for the user to invest their meaning into the world. When mastered by a tool (coercive tools), to whatever degree, the tool determines the user's image and in fact it becomes seen how machines can enslave men (Illich 1973, 21). Regarding the concept 'friendship', we can start by saying that I understand friendship as an intimate relationship between bodies that freely, more often than not, build relationships with each other and affirm each other. In this sense, friendship is discursively-constituted, not falling under the purview of the law, and can be an excellent model for how to understand and interact with others on a larger scale.

### **The Chapters**

In chapter one, I will take on how subjectivity and the way that humans situated in disciplinary, control, and cyborgian societies understand themselves, other humans, and both sentient and non-sentient matter. I will do this through consulting Michel Foucault's work on disciplinary power and biopolitics, Gilles Deleuze's conception of control societies and *dividuals*, and Donna Haraway's cyborg. This chapter emphasizes how the

human body is porous, interconnected with geographical space, time, and interactions with other beings. Outlining how digitality can and is used as a means of proliferating disciplinary power and societies of control, in which human beings who use it are *dividuated*, addresses problems of (mis)conceiving the “self” as a coherent, stable body-as-organism. In the subsequent chapters, we will see how the concepts of the *dividual* and the cyborg reemerge time and time again to explain how the data of users is extracted from them and how users of digitality are intrinsically cyborgian..

In chapter two, I take on how the primacy of the image has smoothed the granularity of perception. I call for an attunement for the grains and textures of life, valuing granularity as a way of understanding how one’s embodiment goes beyond the conceived boundaries of the body-as-organism. Using Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, I examine how the spectacle of social media and other Internet sites have encouraged a phenomenon I refer to as spectacular narcissism. Additionally, this chapter considers the temporalities through which consumption and exploitation occur digitally. As digitality, especially social media applications and streaming sites, becomes the means through which human beings interact with the world and each other, what is otherwise rich, textual experience is flattened to digital, pixelated images.

In chapter three, I build from my valuation of granularity to consider how physical interactions between the flesh and digital have been smoothed, emphasizing friction as a way of understanding and generating political power. Bringing Anna Tsing’s *Friction* and Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” together brings clarity to how friction can be a signal for political potential. Friction can be painful and potentially disastrous, especially when considering global conflicts as Tsing does. My

goal here is to challenge the reader (and myself) to appreciate the complexities of life through textures and friction. Attunement to the textures of life, as seen, felt, heard, and smelt in the clashing and rubbing of bodies (any combination of states, humans, the digital, animals, plants, etc.), builds political power in the sense that it reveals how interwoven these beings are and how the behaviors of one have, sometimes dire, implications for the other(s).

In chapter four, I take on digitality with regards to sociality and interactions through theorizing community and friendship. Regarding the concept of friendship, we can begin by saying that I understand it as an affect and a relation, not simply a relation. I work with a sense of friendship as one of the affective aspects of community, one that people looking to coalition build should be attuned to. Friendship is an uniquely discursively-constituted intimate human relationship, not falling under the purview of the law. As we will see in subsequent chapters, community has provided vital jumping off points for various political movements. However, with the potentially reifying effects of digitality on conceptions of the self and others, problems emerge in how monolithic community can become. Thinking with Donna Haraway's distinction between affinity and identity, this chapter considers philosophies of friendship, paired with J.K. Gibson-Graham's theorizations of community economies and Iris Marion Young's politics of difference, to quell the limits of community – instead orienting towards increased intimacy with(in) the world. Revaluing friction as a source of political potential, I argue for linkages predicating on the concept of friendship across differences.

## Chapter One: The Individuated, Dividuated, Cyborg and What Else?

*The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, the thing that might be worth saying.*

Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*. (1995, 129)

Life in the 21st century is saturated with digitality. We are set in a digital capitalist society, in which people's bodies and their understanding of the world are constantly susceptible to invasions from the Internet, through data collection/monitoring from the government and big technological corporations that sell their data for advertising (Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, etc.). Through these steady invasions, users' conceptions of themselves and their identities have been affected and influenced by an increased proliferation of digitality and media that centers "the self". Michel Foucault outlines concepts of disciplinary societies and the "individual" as a subject. Developing on Foucault's intervention, in 1992 Gilles Deleuze wrote on control societies and *the dividual* as an alternative subject. Notably, even earlier than this, Donna Haraway introduced "the cyborg", which she puts forth as an invitation for more alternatives in the midst of what she understands as a dystopian landscape. Using these concepts, I will open up alternatives; what else is there? People contain multiplicities; thus, drawing from Foucault and theorists such as Judith Butler, I build my argument with a poststructuralist conception of personhood. By building on poststructuralist conceptions, my strands of

thinking are grounded in questions of how certain ‘facts’ come to be accepted and thus reinforce the power of particular actors. This chapter discusses the interventions of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, and Legacy Russell as read together, that challenge the ways in which digital subjugation and control is accepted by society without interrogation and they explore how and where play can happen as a method for opening subversive potential in this coercive relationship between digitality and its users.

### **Disciplinary / Control Societies & Their Subjects**

Michel Foucault’s conceptions of the individual and disciplinary societies are vital for understanding contemporary subject formation. With a focus on concepts of population and subject-formation, Foucault emphasizes how the disciplinary society produces on and molds ‘the individual’ as a subject through which to influence with biopolitics. Foucault introduced biopolitics as an “explicit rupture with the attempt to trace political processes and structures back to biological determinants” (Lemke 2011, 33). Thomas Lemke, known for his work on governmentality and biopolitics, writes that Foucault uses the term to highlight a historical rupture in political thinking characterized by a reshaping of sovereign power and to refer to a style of government that emerges with “liberal forms of social regulation and individual self-governance” (Lemke 2011, 34). Biopolitics, complemented by forms of power that seek to “administer, secure, develop, and foster life”, constitutes a politics of biology and the physical, particularly with regards to human populations and subjectivities (Lemke 2011, 35). In extreme cases, biopower can dispose of lives, dictating who lives, who dies, and in what conditions (Foucault 1990; Lemke 2011, 35). Disciplinary societies, organized via disciplinary power, are societies that train and mold bodies with the goal of managing births,

productivity, and deaths. As biopolitics disciplines the individual's body for productive capacities, there is a relationship between biopolitics, the concept of the individual and their body, and capitalism's disciplinary form (Han 2017, 24).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern society is a disciplinary society. Power and discipline are not synonymous. Discipline is one way that power can be exercised. Within a disciplinary society, subjects are individuated through the organization of space (architecture), time (schedules), the activity and behavior of people (posture, movement) (Foucault 1977, 149-53). Foucault conceives that this occurs within the edicts of formal institutions, such as, but not limited to, schools, hospitals, prisons, the military. This disciplining is executed through both surveillance and the constant awareness of potentially being surveilled. Even if a person is not being watched or directly disciplined in a given moment through methods such as a work schedule or a directive to hold one's body in a certain posture, through the constant threat of surveillance, they are coerced into monitoring their own behavior and the behavior of others in accordance to the norms of the given institution. This panoptic surveillance naturally affects human behavior, whether in the workplace, school, or other institutions. Foucault states how new tactics of power, including penal mechanisms, are "processes of individualization" (Foucault 1977, 23). In this way disciplinary power produces the individual as a subject, and prioritizes subjects taking on productive roles through monitoring adherence to norms of institutions, i.e. the sexuality of married couples as monitored by both civil and canonical law (Foucault 1990, 37).

In his 1992 essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control", Gilles Deleuze updates Foucault's notion of the disciplinary society with his conception of control societies and

“*the dividual*” as a way of understanding how the manipulation of people’s behavior has shifted from clear discipline within formal institutions to a more permeable specter of control. Societies of control are similar to disciplinary societies in that both are marked by monitoring and an emphasis on productivity. However, Deleuze stresses that within a society of control, the specter of control saturates life like a gas, seeping into places outside of formal institutions (Deleuze 1992, 4). Beyond the panoptic nature of a prison or school, the man of control is expected to self-monitor and self-direct, to the extent of auto-exploitation. Instead of there being a conclusion or end, as there are in disciplinary societies with methods such as quotas as to how many of a given product should be produced in a certain day, the demands put on a man of control are limitless and ever expansive.

Control societies are marked by a digital language of control (Deleuze 1992, 4). As a result, data can be gathered and used for and against persons. This marks the human as a *dividual*, as opposed to an “individual”. What starts as particular information about a specific person can be separated from that given person. A person can be divided and subdivided endlessly. Digital language codes information about people, such as the way their eyes move across a screen or what books they browse online. Through representations, this data can be recombined in new ways outside of our control (Deleuze 1992, 5). Such recombinations are based on the criteria deemed salient by those with access to the information, be they government officials or technological corporations, such as Facebook, Twitter, Netflix, and Amazon. With digitality as pervasive as it is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, big technological corporations make millions of dollars through extracting users’ data and algorithmically presenting them with products to consume.

Consequently, big technological corporations are invested in people becoming dependent on their mobile smart phones, streaming services, and social media outlets to present them with what they are made to feel they desire, be it a film recommendation or a suggested ‘friend’ to add on Facebook. On these sites, people are encouraged to curate their personhood as a sort of personal brand – constantly monitoring each other’s behavior in accordance to social norms. These are the societies of control we live within.

### **The Innovation of the Cyborg and More**

In her 1985 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway addresses this digital dystopia and puts forth an expansive understanding of subjectivity referred to as “the cyborg”. The cyborg itself is a rejection of rigid boundaries that superficially separate the human from the machine from the animal (Haraway 1991, 149). Haraway’s intervention is essential; we are cyborgs by virtue of our living in the world. From the vegetables we consume, to the lotions we apply, the air we breathe, the cars we drive, the paint on the walls of our homes, etc., human beings are integrated with(in) our environments in a way that makes it hard to simply demarcate it as “environments”, as if they are distinct from who we are and what we are made of. Human bodies are porous and we are surrounded in and with extensions of ourselves. Cyborgs, completely without innocence, rejoice in the fusion of animal and machine (Haraway 1991, 151; 176).

While embracing the already cyborgian, embodied-in-environment notion of the human, there are ways in which living beings are distinct from machines. I will not work with a strict concept of body-as-organism, as we are all already cyborgs and this subject position, where the boundaries between the human and non-human are blurred, is one full



of pleasure and political potential, as well as important aspects to critique and/or resist.<sup>1</sup>

The pleasure and intrigue in blurred lines between digital and human is evident in science fiction and fantasy media such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Videodrome* (1983). In his book *Flatline Constructs*, theorist Mark Fisher turns to these cyberpunk films while theorizing the Gothic flatline as a zone of radical immanence (Fisher 1999, 179).

Acceptance of the digital dystopian situation at hand and an effort to think creatively of the body and how it relates to the world have political and pleasurable potential. In Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, she poses the idea of making kin, kin that are not limited to humans. She rejects utopia, instead digging for spaces and moments of play and kin-making (Haraway 2006, 102). Through seeing the world as full of potential kin to make, one accesses radical, subversive potential of being situated as a cyborg.

Legacy Russell's manifesto *Glitch Feminism* is an attempt to find room for radical, subversive ways to live online. Russell stresses how expansive subjectivity and the self is (Russell 2020, 20). Using *the glitch* as a metaphor, Russell pushes for creative ways to pierce, penetrate, and tear at the social order through embracing online and all of its avenues for exploration (Russell 2020, 18). She writes that the glitch refuses being flattened, the glitch ghosts, and the glitch encrypts. The glitch as such as is a mode conceptualizing the subversion of otherwise dystopian digital practices, such as reduction of persona to a flat avatar and the *dividualizing* effects of data collection. Other feminist theorists have conceptualized the glitch as a mode of subversion, such as Andie

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows, these important things to critique and resist will be explored and analyzed. These include but are not limited to, the 24/7 virtue of the Internet and digitality, surveillance (which can be used to squash political movements), and how digital images have primacy as the way that users interact with the world.

Shabbar's "Queer-Alt-Delete: Glitch Art as Protest Against the Surveillance Cis-tem" which puts the glitch forth a way of exposing and exploiting vulnerabilities in recognition technologies (Shabbar 2018, 195). Both Russell and Shabbar recognize the danger of digitality, such that the theft of personal data is likely to become one of the greatest shared existential crises of our time (Russell 2020, 73; Shabbar 2018, 201). Nevertheless, Shabbar contends that the overwhelming characterization of biometrics as impenetrable obscures its weaknesses (Shabbar 2018, 201) and Russell states that there can be no return to any concept of 'the real' that does not include the cyber (Russell 2020, 45).

### **Limits of Playing Online: Surveillance, Counterinsurgency, and Racism**

It is worth stressing that online spaces and communities encourage a reification of identity and put people in danger of being more visible than they understand they are agreeing to be, to the extent that their data and content they post can be separated from them and recombined, as Deleuze describes. Anyone with an Internet connection and a smartphone is banally complicit in the theft of their own personal data.<sup>2</sup> Data collection and how these data are endlessly divisible and separate from the human they were extracted from is sinister. Digital traces, from eye movements across a screen to browsing habits, are collected to monitor the user and sell both them (in the *dividualized* sense) and to them. This is a double edged sword. Despite the potential to explore and subvert normative subjectivity online, the coercive nature of digitality can be all-encompassing and it is imperative to address the ills of digitality and how it invades and distorts the

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<sup>2</sup> See *Surveillance Valley* by Yasha Levine, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshanna Zuboff, and/or *The Imagineers of War* by Sharon Weinberger for more history on the particularities of how governments and government contractors have extracted and mined data from users of digitality in order to control their behavior (such as squash revolutionary movements).

body.

The Internet provides avenues to try on new personas and create avatars. Poststructuralist theorists, such as Judith Butler in "Poststructuralism and Postmarxism", stress that there is no self-coherent, stable subject. No one is fixed as they are, but instead, through the context of matter and discourse, different social positions can become believable for any given person (Butler 1993, 10). The ability to pair any image with any text with any other multi-media provides opportunities for an exploration of post-structuralist subjectivity. In *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell uses an example of the American Artist, an artist who uses Instagram, but blocks their images with big blue boxes. If an audience member, an Instagram user in this case, wants to see the art that otherwise would have been posted in lieu of the big blue box, they had to arrange an in person meeting with the artist (Russell 2020, 140). This subversive way of using Instagram raises questions of how the social media application speeds up users' experience of images to the extent where they would have to weigh whether or not they'd be willing to inconvenience themselves by arranging a meeting in order to view the same photo they'd otherwise be met with while scrolling.

Whether users are conscious of their curation or not, having a social media account tied to one's person is increasingly a process of cultivating an aesthetic and personal brand. Since the Internet forgets nothing, this can have felt essentializing effects. When Instagram first launched, users mostly posted silly, nonsensical, un-posed photos on the application. As more and more users use their accounts as a way to sell themselves

to companies as ‘influencers’<sup>3</sup>, Instagram has been pierced by and infused with capitalism. If not selling oneself by trying to accrue as many active users of Instagram as followers as possible, others use the application to shop for the latest fads. The weaving of capitalism throughout an app that is also used for friends to casually share photos with each other creates a risk of capital and control seeping into every aspect of one’s life, outside of formal institutions as Deleuze describes in “Postscript on Societies of Control”. Taking on different avatars, profile pictures, and personas online theoretically has potential to help people understand themselves as ever-changing, unstable, shapeshifting things. However, riskily, the ‘real world’ can become more difficult to navigate as someone spends more and more time in the immaterial, digital world.

Despite how much time they spend cultivating personas online, avid users of the Internet still occupy flesh bodies. A reliance on digitality as a means through which to explore and build one’s understanding of oneself creates a risk of finding more difficulties navigating the real world or losing the ability to make a material claim of who one is, as they would be at the mercy of the interests of big technological corporations. Although the space for play that is available online has potential to help people who cannot express themselves in real life and try on new personas, it is limited in the transformative power it has. A benefit of playing with bending personas is that people can better understand themselves as ever-changing, affected, and affecting entities. The Internet is brimming with possibility, especially for people whose material situations are

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘influencer’ is used online to refer to someone who has “the power to affect buying habits or quantifiable actions of others by uploading some form of original – often sponsored – content to social media platforms” (Martineau 2019). Indicators of an influencer include perceived expertise and authenticity. See “The WIRED Guide to Influencers” by Paris Martineau for more.

such that they cannot explore their multiplicities and are actively made precarious, say because of racism, sexism, and/or homophobia, a few of which Legacy Russell cites as limiting forces she faced while growing up. Russell crucially found the ‘more’ that she needed at the keyboard, remixing her life digitally (Russell 2020, 6). She references coming-of-age at night on the Internet and all the liberating potential that the glitch had for her as a vehicle of refusal (Russell 2020, 9).

Feminist theorists Andie Shabbar and Simone Browne contend that biometric technology, such as is used for facial recognition software, privileges whiteness and lightness. Browne writes on the practice of “prototypical whiteness” which is the way in which white skin and facial features have historically been used as prototypes for the development of recognition technology (Shabbar 2018, 199; Browne 2015, 110). In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Browne insightfully names “digital epidermalization” as the “exercise of power cast by the disembodied gaze of certain surveillance technologies (for example, identity card readers and passport verification machines) that can be employed to do the work of alienating the subject by producing a truth about the racial body and one’s identity (or identities) despite the subject’s claims” (Browne 2015, 110). On this note, Andie Shabbar contributes that this non-recognition of black and brown people “as trusted travelers works in hand with white appearance norms that successfully uphold the gender binary” (Shabbar 2018, 199). As these essentialized understandings of gender and race are upheld by biometric technology, violence is done to people who do not fit the “prototype” as such.

In his book *Surveillance Valley*, investigative journalist Yasha Levine looks into projects funded by the Pentagon’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). Levine

links big technological corporations such as Google, Amazon, and eBay with US government agencies, writing that some parts of these companies are so intertwined with American ‘security services’ that it can be hard to tell where one ends and the other begins (Levine 2018, 5). Projects funded by ARPA include some that were “aimed at studying local populations to pinpoint the social and cultural factors that could be used to predict why and when tribes [such as in villages in Thailand] would be insurgent” (Levine 2018, 29). A study in Thailand involving ARPA and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) sought to gauge the effectiveness of counterinsurgency measures such as assassinations and forcibly relocating villages (Levine 2018, 29). In the proposal for this study, it is stated that it was meant to serve as a model for counterinsurgency projects at large, including against Black people in the United States (Garrett 1970, 12). Levine cites the project’s proposal which states, “The potential applicability of the findings in the United States will also receive special attention. In many of our key domestic programs, especially those directed at disadvantaged sub-cultures, the methodological problems are similar to those described in this proposal” (Levine 2018, 30).

Looking at these cases of surveillance, counterinsurgency, and racism, through data collection and mining on the Internet, it is crucial to remember that the Internet as we know it was originally deployed as military intelligence technology (Levine 2018, 75). Surveillance and data collection are not new, but rather have been baked into the architecture of digitality since the beginning. The glitch is one way of conceptualizing the ills of biometrics and data collecting, giving artists a way to bend data in subversive ways that break binary boundaries of zeros and ones (Shabbar 2018, 200). Despite its illuminating pockets for post-structuralist exploration of multiplicities of the self, it is

important to consider how these opportunities online occur under grips of control and how the Internet can be a dangerous and extractive place.

### **What The Internet Demands From Users**

In his book *Psychopolitics*, Byung-Chul Han states that data is not surrendered under duress, but rather offered out of a felt inner need in the user. Thus, the digital panopticon is efficient, as transparency is demanded from users in the name of freedom of speech and information (Han 2017, 9). When sharing details about their lives online, users are rewarded with likes, comments, clout, and/or attention. In this digital society, compulsory disclosure and full transparency are the norm, as users are made to feel that their followers care intently about their lives. This spectacular narcissistic tendency is propagated as social media use and sharing of personal photos and stories on the Internet become habitual in the everyday. As this norm settles in, so does the constant threat of everyone monitoring everyone else's behavior, be it through hateful, cruel comments or encouragement. Han describes this recent intensification of surveillance as "digital psychopolitics", marked by a shift from passive surveillance to active steering (Han 2017, 11).

The technology corporations that provide outlets for people to post, such as Facebook and Instagram, collect user's data and have knowledge of the dynamics of social communication. This knowledge can be used for dominion and control. It enables influence to take place on a pre-reflexive level (Han 2017, 12). Users are suggested products, music, movies, 'friends' and more through algorithms and targeted advertising. Social media activities, from scrolling to receiving notifications of likes and comments, release neurochemicals like dopamine that make webpages addictive, generating a

dependence between the user and said application. Through the collection of massive amounts of data on *dividuals*, big technological corporations are increasingly able to present users with targeted items that they feel compelled to consume, as evident by algorithms suggesting movies, books, and friends to ‘add’ on Instagram. Through this, persons are distorted into impersonal things, *dividuals*; collections of data that can be predicted and influenced according to the goals of technology corporations.<sup>4</sup>

To Han, total, smoothed, efficient communication has a leveling effect. It is as if everyone is watching over everyone. Even before intelligence agents come into the picture, primary, intrinsic surveillance (Han 2017, 8). The effect of this surveillance is conformity, as everyone is watching over everyone else – even as, if not before, intelligence agencies or corporations represent data (Han 2017, 10). Han emphasizes this as a crisis of freedom, as today, users voluntarily expose themselves without any external constraint or edict commanding them to do so at all. Volunteering one's data has to do with a lack of transparency of this medium that is the Internet, which intently produces ignorance (in asymmetrical, uneven, unequal ways). Users of social media, streaming sites, and online shopping websites put any and all conceivable information about themselves on the Internet. Even some users who may be more informed end up relinquishing their data either because there is no choice, or because the spectacular narcissistic desire for self-curated digital existence that the Internet produces is stronger

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<sup>4</sup> In his book *Portfolio Society*, Ivan Ascher analyzes the relationship between capitalism and predictions. Ascher primarily focuses on the securities market and agencies such as Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan (Ascher 2016, 81). Through possessing control over the means of prediction (Ascher 2016, 29), be it market predictions or algorithmic advertising predictions, corporations grip the power to extract people’s desires and whims and warp it into profits. See *Portfolio Society* by Ivan Asher for more.



than a sense of self-preservation of one's personal data. This results in big technological corporations having the power to *dividualize* users beyond what their everyday comprehension may be, suggesting an urgent lack of control.

### **Where Do We Go From Here: Retaining The Right to Disappear**

The response to these problems is not necessarily to close oneself off entirely, but to find ways to play and challenge what everyday dependences and exploitations get accepted without interrogation. Controlling and regulating oneself in accordance with what the dominantly accepted line already is puts a massive limit on exploration and on political imagination, resulting in a lasting, psychic impact of not being able to say what you think or what you want to say. Additionally, being able to publicly say whatever fleeting thought crosses one's mind, thinking it as important and having an audience feeds and proliferates narcissist drives. This narcissism, which will be deepened in chapter two, is encouraged by the design of these sites and apps; a TV show for each person, a cult of followers that you can scroll through. Exploring the multiplicities of the self with the Internet as a tool holds potential, as does spreading political and/or cultural information on sites, such as sharing events on Facebook or Twitter that will reach wider audiences. However, sites run by big technological corporations such as YouTube and Facebook should not be seen as radical channels, as through them users are bound to their terms of service and are made *dividuals* through their data extraction and recombination.

Heavy-users of social media outlets risk becoming dependent on the corporations that control apps to deliver them external validation of their identities and feelings. The uneasy feeling of having one's data separated and recombined into representation can create a crisis of identity. Thus, in attempts to feel solid ground and cope with their own

lack of control over their subjectivity, essentialist understandings of personhood and identity are encouraged. This breeds an insecure attachment to digitality and is a massive limitation of online spaces to provide an exploratory outlet for people who are in untenable, stressful, even dangerous material conditions. It is reasonable that some semblance of solid ground, or coherent identity, is felt as desirable when things feel otherwise immaterial.

With a post-structuralist understanding of subjectivity, I argue for building the ground as we go instead of seeking external validation on these sites that tend to be extractive and essentializing. When people who are in unsustainable material living situations, in which maybe they do not have loved ones or support systems to call on, are justifiably upset because of their precarious positions, a feeling like the Internet is the only tenable outlet for expression, community, and play can emerge. This can especially be the case among young people who have never lived without having a computer at their fingertips.<sup>5</sup> Use of social media sites and forums can be useful for making users laugh, helping them stay in touch with distant friends, and disseminating political information to wide audiences. However, these applications and sites are designed to reap massive profits for and by corporations and cannot be trusted to have the users' interests at heart.

*Dividualizing* members of a state and/or digital society is beneficial to powerful institutions, like governments and corporations, because through doing so, they possess the means to manipulate people based on what their desires are ascertained to be through

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<sup>5</sup> The effects that social media have on adolescent well-being are more often negative than not. However, this effect is heterogeneous across the population, hence the importance of deepening understandings of relations between the digital and the human. See the research explored in "Loneliness and Social Connections" for more (Ortiz-Ospina 2020).

data extraction and recombination. For instance, reliance on streaming sites for entertainment means that users are told through the algorithms that dictate the site that they are understood to be x, y, z type of person. This sort of algorithmic sorting alienates people from themselves, their desires, and their ability to deal with the friction of daily life. The importance of being grounded in material reality is that heavy users of digitality risk deprivation of a rich, dynamic inner life and conception of themselves, and in turn, the inability to imagine that others might be more dynamic than they seem at first glance.

Legacy Russell suggests that ghosting the binary body can be a radical political opportunity for releasing ourselves from what she understands to be a damaging relationship between “the idea of the body” and “gender as a construct” (Russell 2020, 63). Through ghosting the binary body, Russell contends that people can challenge how their data is used and make their information useless. Without using the concept of the *dividual*, she acknowledges how the body is disappearing and instead the meaning of personhood is being attributed to bank cards and phone signals; which Deleuze would mark as digital language (Russell 2020, 65). Legacy Russell’s intervention is thought-provoking and she makes an apt point that the gender binary contributes to how big technological companies such as Google advertise and represent, but how does one ghost the binary body when technological corporations will ascribe meaning to the digital data points no matter whether we see them as masculine or feminine or multitudinous ourselves (Russell 2020, 64-5)? What can be gained by disappearing or being forgotten? Is there subversive potential in ghosting online?

Reclaiming the body as a site for political action holds risks, including the risk of doing violence unto bodies by flattening them into essentialist categories, such as the

ones that biometric technologies engender. Despite this, it is important to claim the body as a site and not abandon it. Because of how coercive the relationship between people and mobile smart devices (and in turn, applications used for both work and pleasure like Zoom) has become, people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital age have lost the right to disappear. Information lasts indefinitely on the Internet, even when a user is told that an account or messages of theirs are deleted. In the European Union, there is a defense of the “right to be forgotten” online with the goal of data protection and privacy. The intellectual roots of the “right to be forgotten” are in French law which demarcates “*le droit à l’oubli*” which translates to the “right of oblivion” (Rosen 2012, 88). This law gives convicted criminals who have been rehabilitated the right to object to the publishing of their crimes (Rosen 2012, 88). In the material world pre-digitality, the threat of one’s past following them is not as urgent as it is online; the Internet forgets nothing. Some Americans have criticized this law for violating freedom of speech, though what is to be said about having the space and time not to speak?

We began this chapter with an passage from *Negotiations* in which Deleuze writes: “The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don’t stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, the thing that might be worth saying” (Deleuze 1995, 129) The repressive, coercive forces of engaging with other users and content online compel users to ‘express themselves’. This expression, in turn, is extracted from them and recombined in *dividualizing* ways. Through embracing

and creating “little gaps of solitude and silence” users of the Internet can think and consider their thoughts without the demand of full transparency or sharing them.

Teenagers and children often try to sneak more screentime in wherever they can through playing video games or watching television. Within a digital society of control, it feels irresponsible or disobedient to attempt to squeeze non-screentime in, as there is an emphasis on sharing oneself. Users of the Internet and digital apparatuses such as telephones, streaming sites, and social media find ourselves in a crisis of freedom, imagination, and expression. Pressure to share oneself and information about one’s personal life online feeds into a narcissistic, unimaginative culture that relies on credentializing via things that have happened to a given person.

Considering Russell’s suggestion to ghost the body, the EU law that gives citizens “the right to disappear” online, and Deleuze’s vouch for solitude and silence, I argue for a politics of discretion. Doing nothing and saying nothing is an actionable event. Through sneaking in non-screentime, a break can be taken for free, playful thought that is not tied to one’s personhood forever via the Internet and data collection. By not consuming fast-paced streamable media and the vitriol of social media, interruptions can be made where one can understand their own thinking and awareness of the world in new, imaginative ways.

## Chapter Two: Granularity of Perception: Refusing the Primacy of the Digital Image

*Photography is alright if you don't mind looking at the world from the point of view of a paralyzed cyclops — for a split second. But that's not what it's like to live in the world, or to convey the experience of living in the world.*

— David Hockney, Lawrence Weschler *True to Life* (2008, 6).

Increased digitality in everyday life comes with promises of unprecedented access to knowledge, convenience through streamlined consumption, and instantaneous connection with an ever-expansive swath of people from loved ones to strangers across the globe. With the advent of television, radio, films, and print, society became more image-saturated and reliant on representations in order to perceive life. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord critiques this image-saturated culture in which, he says, social life has degraded from *being*, into *having*, into *appearing to have* (Debord 1967, 17). Contemporary theorist Jonathan Crary devised the concept of 24/7 temporality to critique how the perpetual, 24/7 availability of both work and consumption emphasized by digital capitalism eats at our sleep and degrades our ability to pay detailed and directed attention. Deep attention and engagement feel elusive because of how image-based digital capitalist society is. Since 1967 when Debord wrote on this, image-based life has intensified with the proliferation of social media sites that *dividualize* users who, in turn, spectacularize themselves through posting – leading to a phenomenon I will call spectacular narcissism. Perception is flattened through increased primacy of the digital image and the impulse to constantly center oneself as a spectacle. A more granular mode of perception would attend to the different degrees of sight, smell, feel, and taste of an experience or situation,

leading one to be able to attune the rhythms, degrees, and depth of one's energy and attention, as opposed to being steered by algorithms.

The importance of using a term like 'granularity' is to encapsulate something multidimensional, that includes the senses, a sense of relief and depth rather than flatness, a different experience of embodiment, of humanness, a different temporality perhaps, and different affect. Through a recalibration of the granularity of one's perception, the damages of spectacularized society, such as an inability to focus on anything other than the self, can be mitigated. Developing from the works of Guy Debord and Jonathan Crary, and paired with the understandings of subjectivity put forth in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on how social media applications go further beyond Debord's notion of the spectacle in subjecting users to flattened, representation-based lives and how to refusing the primacy of the digital image, in lieu of a more granular appreciation of the major senses.

### **Image-Saturation through Debord's Society of Spectacle**

Guy Debord's 1967 *The Society of The Spectacle* is an indictment of the image-saturated culture proliferated by consumerism and capitalism. He argues that capitalism reduces society to the Spectacle. The Spectacle is made up of images, but it is not simply a collection of images. Instead, the Spectacle is evocative of the social relations between people that are mediated by and through images (Debord 1967, 12). Through the increased primacy of images, which are representations, or mere signs, of life itself – life risks becoming reduced to pure representation. Images are commodifiable and easy to consume without much friction or inconvenience, so the sign risks becoming preferred to the signified thing, a representation preferred to reality (Debord ch. 1). Debord argues

that social life has degraded from *being*, into *having*, into *appearing to have* (Debord 1967, 17). Notably, Debord stresses that the spectacle is not fake or untrue, but a real product of reality because when the world is transformed into mere images, images become real beings and reality becomes an endless supply of commodifiable fragments (Debord 1967, 43).

As appearances are affirmed and images gain primacy in social life, human fulfillment finds basis in what commodifiable fragments one merely appears to possess. The spectacle is one way that capitalism distracts and pacifies the masses (Debord 1967, 38). The spectacle's "pulsating machinery" quickly replaces events with new ones that vie for public attention without those who are informed of them actually living them (Debord 1967, 114). Spectators are kept from directing their attention and energy on striving to become something or obtain something by this emphasis on gaining information and codifying possession. The commodified images, perpetual overstimulation and shallowness that Debord describes have dehumanizing effects, emphasizing maintenance of *appearance* of life rather than experience itself (Debord 1967, 116). Therefore, Debord makes his critique of how far the image-saturation of society has gone in the 1960s, when the latest, most controversial form of technology that American families had regular access to was a simple television set (McLuhan 1994).<sup>6</sup> Social media applications such as Instagram have upwards of 500 million monthly users and 300 million daily users, posting over 95 million photos and videos per day (Dumas et

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan writes on how television was deemed to be unsuited to hot issues and sharply defined controversial topics in a 1963 article by Edith Efron in *TV Guide*.



al. 2017). Bearing this in mind, social media has taken the spectacle to an even more disastrous and degrading level, leading to an uptick of spectacular narcissism.

### **The Spectacle under Social Media's Reign: a Proliferation of Spectacular Narcissism**

Photography and film collapse time and geographic distance in a way that creates a surface-level, image-based connectivity that lacks granularity. With the proliferation of social media as a regular part of everyday life for millions of people who use it, this real, surface-level phenomenon of supposedly universal connectivity has only grown more all-encompassing (Debord 1967, 120). Focused on mass communication and unilateral media, such as television, Debord theorizes that the spectacle gives members of society a sense that they are affecting the spectacle when they engage with each other about it. Though he has many passages in *The Society of the Spectacle* that stress how spectacle produces and nourishes individualism, the notion of spectacle that Debord put forth did not include individualized modes of speculation such as the ones that are present through social media applications. He writes, "The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone who represents them to him" (Debord 1967, 23). Despite the individual's gestures, the spectacle appears without allowing any reply; any reply gets folded into it. A 21<sup>st</sup> century update to Debord's theory of the spectacle is needed, as the social media has created a condition that is a further aggravation of what Debord denounced then in 1967. Now each individual, or each *dividual* (each fragmented bit of self-commodified, circulated and capitalized upon as it is reduced to data which

users provide by the very act of using the web), can be a spectacle via social media. This has the effect of proliferating narcissism, or spectacular narcissism.

Narcissism is a personality condition with varying degrees of extremity marked by feelings of entitlement, an excessive need to be admired, a tendency to exploit others, and grandiosity (Singh, Farley, and Donahue 2018; Brown et al. 2009). As one of the oldest constructs in the history of psychology, narcissism is heterogeneous and multiple, diverging perspectives have guided theory and research (Brown et al. 2009). Feminist theorists, such as Alexis Wick for *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, note that sensorially the figure of Narcissus is dominated by the visual, symbolizing the vantage point of visual display rather than “tactile relationality” (Wick 2013, 47). With particular relation to Debord’s society of the spectacle and social media, I suggest the phrase spectacular narcissism to describe how *dividuals* spectacularize themselves online.

Psychological research suggests that narcissism is one of the most salient predictors of activity level on social media applications (Dumas et al. 2017). In 2017, a study was conducted by a team of psychologists, including psychologists Tara M. Dumas, Matthew Maxwell-Smith, Jordan P. Davis, and Paul A. Giulietti, to research the difference between two forms of like-seeking behavior on Instagram, normative and deceptive (Dumas et al. 2017). The goal of this study was to identify young people who are potentially more susceptible to engaging in deceptive acts for attention on social media. They claim that college students who are narcissistic, as if this was primary, go toward social media more. Another psychological study done on computers in human behavior found reasonable support that college students with higher narcissism scores

were more likely to use Instagram for surveillance, documentation, and coolness<sup>7</sup> (Sheldon et al. 2016). Deceptive like-seeking behavior has been linked to narcissistic tendencies and weaker-senses of community belonging, which are also considered to be predictors of activity levels on social media (Dumas 2017; Sheldon 2016). These studies reify narcissism as an intrinsic personality trait with no account for societal forces in the process of subject-formation.

Analyzing narcissism's link to social media usage raises questions of how to figure the relationship between the symbol and what is symbolized, in this case narcissistic tendencies and social media use. Considering Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, how should we understand the relationship between drives and symptoms, between the symbol and what is symbolized (Deleuze 1972, 23)? Are these relationships between social media drives of narcissism and to be understood as causal? My argument is not that narcissists get a platform in the form of social media, but a less essentialist argument: that social media, with its primacy on visuals and catering to the given user's 'likes', encourages spectacular narcissism. In this way, narcissism is encouraged and reinforced by social media in a way similar to Felix Guattari's description in *The Three Ecologies* where he writes, "the narcissist is coerced into sociality in the name of the creative spirit and sexual instinct" (Guattari 1989, 155). The very phrase 'spectacular narcissism' stresses societal processes of subject formation rather than taking the (potentially pathological) subject for preexisting relations of power.

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<sup>7</sup> Surveillance refers to keeping tabs on other users. Coolness refers to becoming popular, peer-belonging, and self-promotion. Documentation refers to sharing a user's life with other people and commemorating events. See Sheldon et al. 2016 for more.

Through the sharing of information about protests, educational events, ideas, and life stories, there are opportunities for political and social engagement online that are not shallow. Over the summer of 2020, as protests against police brutality and racism following the murder of George Floyd were being organized, crucial information was shared on social media about locations of protests, safety tips for how to protest during a pandemic, and book lists for those interesting in learning more about the history of racist police brutality in the United States. During this time, one phenomenon on Instagram raised questions of the efficacy and value in posting as a political act. Alongside posts of infographics that shared information about George Floyd's death and the history of racism in the United States, thousands of self-identified supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement posted plain black squares on Instagram.

Although arguments have been made that this mass posting of black squares on #BlackOutTuesday was a subversive political act of interrupting the usual spectacle of Instagram, I would suggest that it was also informed by spectacular narcissism. Posts tagged by and sorted through hashtags with information about the work organizations were doing to seek justice for the assailed were obstructed by these other posts (the plain black squares) that merely coded support without materially offering it to Black communities. Spectacular narcissism informed the pause of usual spectacularization that goes on through selfies and instead, people received likes for sharing a timely political opinion, without necessarily actively engaging in the work of material solidarity. Social media provides users with the ability to talk about and visually experience political and cultural events as they are happening; however, social media centers the given user leading to narcissistic tendencies (Dumas et al. 2017).

As a result of algorithms that feed users content (tweets, Instagram photos, etc.) based on the way their data has been extracted from them and recombined into representations of that person as a *dividual*, social media often seems to facilitate productive conversations, when actually users are usually met with opinions and content that either will enrage them or pacify them (Cinelli et al. 2021).<sup>8</sup> By relearning how to pause and perceive slowly, one can process events and experiences more granularly as they unfold, as opposed to rushing to participate in the spectacle by spectacularizing oneself through posts without much deliberation. The most avid social media users are unable to sit and process horrific events without feeling pressure to generate ‘hot takes’<sup>9</sup> about them as they are unfolding (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*). This is a tendency tied to spectacular narcissism; feelings of entitlement and an excessive need to be admired lead people with spectacular narcissistic tendencies to post images that signal their allyship without necessarily supporting said movement materially (Brown et al. 2009). Political power can be built online through communicating vital details regarding community organizing, but individuals are constituted and subjected by this urge to publicly put forth an opinion or signal an opinion on political issues as events are unfolding.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a concept on the Internet called “rage bait”. For instance, journalist Elizabeth Bruenig wrote a nuanced opinions article for the NY Times on her own experience with young motherhood. The title is “I Became a Mother at 25, and I’m Not Sorry I Didn’t Wait”, which incited vitriol towards her on Twitter. The title she had suggested was “Young as a Mother”. (Bruenig, Elizabeth. Twitter Post. May 9, 2021, 1:48 PM). It could be argued that this headline was selected by the NY Times for the emotional response it could elicit, but I won’t assume their intentions. Overall, this is an example of how emotional responses are extracted from users on the Internet to keep them (and their dopamine receptors) engaged.

<sup>9</sup> Merriam-Webster defines ‘hot take’ as, “a quickly produced, strongly worded, and often deliberately provocative or sensational opinion or reaction (as in response to current news)”, with the first known use of it in 2012.

## Juxtaposing Grains vs. Pixels

Perception is constituted by the five major senses: smell, touch, taste, sight, and sound. Typically, a person has access to multiple senses at once in the midst of any given situation or experience (Stein and Meredith 1993). For instance, a dog walking by can be heard, seen, smelled at the same time. In this way, these multiple senses sync and constitute a person's perception. Mass media technologies create an excess of images, leading to a shift in world view as digital images grip primacy over other senses such as touch, scent, and taste. Images and sounds can keep people at a distance from each other, whereas taste, smell, and touch require an intimacy and embodiedness that cannot be easily turned away from.

We began this chapter with a quote from artist David Hockney that speaks to the limits of photography in capturing what life is like.<sup>10</sup> Photography has a rich political and aesthetic history, but digital images have become the primary way in which people experience things they otherwise have never seen. Photography is limited in what it allows the viewer to perceive. The inherent distance created by visuals and the viewer creates intrigue and mystery, but when people become dependent on only sight to understand the world, they risk missing out on the fullness that a more granular mode of perception provides. The emphasis on visual and verbal communication in our society is

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<sup>10</sup> There is much to consider and appreciate about the politics and aesthetics of photography. The aesthetics of staging photographs can contribute to the reversal and displacement of dualisms, such as staging a photograph in a way that plays with contradictions and different views to reveal the dynamism of power dynamics. Additionally, the viewer and the view taken are interpellated into the meaning creation of the work. This is to suggest that the nuances of photography run deep; photographs, like any work, do not exist in the vacuum, and neither does their meaning. This project does not set out to critique photography as such, but rather the primacy put on the digital image through social media and streaming content online.

detrimental to generating granular perception that appreciates how interwoven life is with the sentient and non-sentient alike.

In the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, physical distance has been crucial to slowing down the spread of this disease (Turk 2020). For more than one year, people have been mandated to not share physical space or touch others, to varying degrees depending on where a person resides. Work, family life, and play among loved ones who do not reside in a home together are regularly taking place on video platforms such as Zoom. As a result, more intensely and universally than ever, instead of touch and smell and the physical sense of a person, social relations are mediated by images and sound alone, with the primary touch available being the smoothness of the keyboard. When deprived of the other senses and coerced into experiencing loved ones and colleagues alike as pixels on a screen, exhaustion sets in from relying on sight and sound in these video calls. Video chatting generates a felt need to emote more in order to compensate for the limits of virtual interaction (Sklar 2020). Additionally, Zoom<sup>11</sup> emphasizes increased self-evaluation from staring at a video of oneself, constraints on physical mobility, and eye gaze at a close distance for long stretches of time. Usually when meeting with people in-person, one is oriented in such a way where they do not have front-on views of multiple people for long stretches of time, as bodies tend to face different ways and attention is directed towards things other than faces, which on Zoom, take up the whole screen (Bailenson 2021).

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<sup>11</sup> The ubiquity of the software (a jump from 10 million users in Dec 2019 to 300 million users by May 2020) leads me to use it as a catch-all term for videoconferencing, which also includes Google Hangout, Microsoft Teams, Apple FaceTime, and more that I am sure I am unaware of at the moment.

Digital images function in a different way from lens and film based photographs. They exist as numerical data which can be displayed in any number of warped ways, such as shifting temporal resolution or simulating sets or actors that are not really present (Manovich 1994, 3). The emphasis put on appearances by the saturation of digital photographs can breed mistrust, because a digital image can be edited in any number of deceptive ways. It becomes understood that things as captured in photographs may not be as they seem.<sup>12</sup> Old film could be edited plenty as well, as different versions of the same recorded image can be created. This process takes more craft, time, skill, and effort. Particular to digital pictures is the flatness of zero / one programming language. Thus, a significant difference in looking at a digital photograph versus a film photograph is the texture and lack of relief. A single digital photograph contains millions of pixels; however, these pixels are discrete and finite, as opposed to the expansive, limitless amount of data information in a continuous-tone photograph (Manovich 1994, 7).

In Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," he gestures to how works of art have always been reproducible, whether a replica made by pupils of masters or a third party copying art in pursuit of profits (Benjamin 2010, 12). Graphic art was reproducible via the woodcut and enabled to accompany everyday life. Photography emerged a few decades later (Benjamin 2010, 13). Benjamin writes of the concept called 'aura': a strange tissue of space and time, the

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<sup>12</sup> As algorithms and artificial intelligence become more advanced, it is easier to fake photographs of people, including regular citizens or celebrities and politicians. "Deepfake" is a term that refers to videos or digital images that superimpose realistic faces onto the bodies of others with the intention of creating fake representations. This growing phenomenon includes computer-generated pornographic videos of celebrities and actors. I include this to highlight how prolific misinformation through image-rendering is already online.



unique appearance of distance. Aura depends on the desire of the masses to ‘bring things closer’. Aura is marked by this strong urge to get hold of an object, but also how uniqueness in art is valued as its embeddedness in the context of tradition (Benjamin 2010, 16). Auras beckon from early photographs, such as through capturing human expressions as they were in ‘the here and now’ (Benjamin 2010, 19).

Benjamin writes, “In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence at the place at which it is to be found” (Benjamin 2010, 13). This is what constitutes the concept of a work of art’s authenticity and aura. To Benjamin, the sphere of authenticity eludes technological reproduction, as an authentic work retains its authority as authentic in the face of a reproduction made by hand, but not with technological reproductions (Benjamin 2010, 13). Technological reproductions are more independent of the original than reproductions made by hand. For instance, photographic technological reproduction has the potential to bring out aspects unseen by the human eye. Benjamin uses the example of a cigarette lighter to illustrate how human beings know almost nothing of what happens between the hand and metal, “and still less how this varies with different moods” (Benjamin 2010, 30). To him, the camera comes into play here, with its resources for zooming, swooping, rising stretching, and/or compressing. The optical unconscious is unveiled but, when considering how different affects and moods affect the aura, or grain of feeling, does this really show what happens between the flesh and machine?

The speed and regularly with which users of the Internet’s eyes are met with digital images potentially desensitizes them through what Nicholas Mirzoeff names a

“banality of images” (Pisters 2012, 272).<sup>13</sup> The regularity of images gets people accustomed to flattens the grain of the experience. In a society of the spectacle where emphasis is put on *appearing to have* as opposed to actually cultivating affective traits, mistrust and envy become focal points. These features keep people invested emotionally when they might otherwise slip out from the grasp of the spectacle. The omnipresence of digital images inflicts damages expanding from affects of mistrust and paranoia, to desensitization that affects public opinion and therefore logistics of war (Pisters 2012).<sup>14</sup>

### **The Problems and Demands of 24/7 Extraction**

In *24/7*, Jonathan Crary frames his critique of capitalism’s invasion into sleep and human consciousness by developing the concept of 24/7 temporality to describe the deleterious ways in which capitalist commodification and spectacle invade every level and moment of life. ‘24/7’ evokes the arbitrary schema of a week extracted from any notion of a cumulative experience. This connotes that the given operation being described is uninterrupted and therefore, analysis extends to everyday time (Crary 2012, 9). Crary emphasizes that a 24/7 world is the final capitalist mirage, a world without shadows, a world that doesn’t require sleep. Instead of invigorated with life, it is a world aligned with what is inanimate and unchanging (Crary 2012, 9-10). Sleep is increasingly colonized by digital capitalism, evident through Crary citing research that the number of

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase is used by Nicholas Mirzoeff in his book *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, in which he examines the American war against Iraq through the experience of television, cinema, and the Internet. He does visual activist work at the intersection of politics and digital visual culture.

<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard and Patricia Pisters write on how perception of the First Gulf War led to spectacularization that created virtual wars of deterrence, i.e. Hollywood plotting of the war as a story led to seeing Saddam as “the ultimate uncanny oriental body” – see *The Neuro-Image* by Pisters for more.

people who wake to check their messages is growing exponentially (Crary 2012, 13). Crary employs Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of seriality and 'recurrence' to explain how forms of mass conformity and homogeneity are produced. Seriality is Sartre's term for powerlessness that is spawned by a continuous cycle of capitalism that leads to the production of loneliness (Crary 2012, 111). Seriality shifts collectivity into an aggregate of individuals who relate to each other on the basis of optics and narcissistic identities (Crary 2012, 116). Although, seriality is not necessarily a sign of narcissistic tendencies, as shopping at the supermarket is an example of seriality in everyday life, desultory digital activity, such as compulsively refreshing Instagram, is also an example of seriality. Narcissism feeds on repetition, reiteration, and a sense of individual self constantly being fed via others, such that seriality is an intrinsic aspect of it.

Capitalism drives an emphasis on 24/7 productivity in aspects of life from social to professional to political. This results-oriented, instant-gratification style of participation in the world leads to shallow participation, stunted perception, and therefore an inescapable feeling of alienation and disconnectedness. An emphasis on productivity, in both labor and consumption of media, contributes to an affect of paranoia and suspicion. This generalized feeling of paranoia and suspicion is informed by the felt need to prove oneself or to abide by some social contract at all times. The damage that this constant-possibility-of-stimulation creates is in the tempo of life, the *dividualizing* of subjects, and consequent intensifications of control. Users of digitality are enmeshed more and more in these systems. In this digital capitalist society in which a person has hundreds of thousands of options for content to watch, read, consume 24/7, coercion is

generated by *dividualizing* and algorithmically presenting content to said *dividual*. This system is structured to take advantage of desires and extract energy from *dividuals*.

To Byung-Chul Han, ‘can’ is more coercive than ‘should’ (Han 2017, 1). Having seemingly unlimited options is paralyzing, especially when society constitutes and prioritizes the individual, or *dividual*, as a subject. As disciplinary societies produce individuals, said individuals are constituted by a notion, or illusion, of being free to choose how they spend their time and subjected into managing it productively. Endless possibilities of items and experiences to consume, from new shirts pushed by fast fashion to Netflix streamable TV shows, are pushed onto users of digital platforms, 24/7. As data about users are extracted from their screen use, separated from them, and rearranged into representations of who they supposedly are in this *dividualizing* way, algorithms present products and services as tailor made for said *dividual*.

Han writes that under neoliberalism, there is no proletariat, which is what makes for its stability as a system. Instead, the hallmark of neoliberalism is classless self-exploitation and consequent auto-aggression (Han 2017, 6). With the vast number of options in front of someone at any given moment online – from gig economy jobs to endless movies to watch, etc. – people are not inclined to revolution as much as they are inclined towards depression and self-defeat (Han 2017, 7). Under neoliberalism, people who do not thrive in the digital capitalist society of auto-exploitation understand themselves as responsible for their condition and feel shame (Han 2017, 6). The system cannot adequately be resisted when those who suffer feel that they are suffering at their own hands.

Essential to this neoliberal system is an illusion of choice and autonomy. The society of the spectacle is internalized and leads members of it to feel as though they are consuming freely. Han asks the question, “Do we really want to be free?” (Han 2017, 7). If we were actually free from debt, wholly free, we would have to act. Whether one is an office-worker or works in retail, the eight-hour workday maintains the public as purchase-happy. Time away from formal work and duties feels scarce and therefore valuable. Thus, workers, such as ones who are exploited 40+ hours per week in the workplace and then subjected to 24/7 possibilities to either exploit themselves more (with gig economy work such as driving Uber) or encouraged to “have fun” by consuming media online, are willing to pay for convenience and any gratification they can get, even if it is instant, short-term, algorithmically-fed gratification, such as scrolling through Facebook or streaming TV shows that are fed to them by Netflix’s *dividualizing*.

### **Reclaiming Idle Time as a Way of Deepening Perception**

The felt need to consume new content or labor perpetually, 24/7, combined with the addictive design of media that centers the digital image contributes to a flattening of the granularity of perception and proliferation of snap judgments. Users of social media are encouraged to skim headlines, form a quippy opinion on a given event as quickly as possible, and move onto the next task rather than to observe, reflect, and be embodied in a slowed down way. The ever-possible consumption of new images and media discourages an appreciation for complexity and depth, affecting how people understand each other, the world they are situated within, and themselves.

Insightfully, Jonathan Crary demarcates one aspect of disempowerment within 24/7 societies as “the incapacitation of daydream or of any mode of absent-minded

introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time” (Crary 2012, 88). The notion of “absent-minded introspection” is poignant; having idle time or waiting time is crucial to developing an inner life and a sense of direction and intentions. By virtue of being weaved with capitalism, digital society is focused on convenience and efficiency in the name of production and consumption (Crary 2012, 50). Slowing life down so that an appreciation for the grains of our embodied environment can open up new appreciations for the interconnectedness of the human and non-human, as opposed to living, or consuming, at the direction of the algorithms of big technological corporations. Finding ways to live with the dystopian, cyborgian conditions of society, depends on members of said society making meaningful connections with others, both human and nonhuman. Spectacular narcissism deteriorates the otherwise granular, kin-like connections that can be made.

In Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*, she stresses the necessity of kin-making, “making persons, not necessarily as individuals or humans”, in a dystopia that tears us apart (Haraway 2016, 103). Kin-making does not shy away from the burdens such as nuclear pollution, desertification, and destructive technology. To Haraway, the earth is full of refugees, human and non-human (Haraway 2016, 100). In order to reconstitute refuges and make kin with all sorts of critters, it is necessary to fine-tune one’s granularity of attention so that one can appreciate the grains of life and nonlife assembled in a common ‘flesh’ (Haraway 2016, 103). The granularity of a person’s perception is informed by what their focus is oriented towards at a given time in a given environment. When calibrating one’s perception, it is vital to have a sense of direction. With the media cycle operating as mind-numbingly fast as it does, exiting the trajectory

of productive time demands self-regulation. Algorithms and the big technological companies that employ them prey on users' data by *dividualizing* them and presuming that users will be swayed to make decisions on whims. Having the wherewithal to not have data, energy, and attention perpetually extracted from you on impulses requires getting away from the flow of data. This requires at least a modicum of discipline and intentionality, which are cultivated through idle time, waiting time, and wasting time.<sup>15</sup>

The, ultimately unsatisfying, instant gratification of being able to passively consume, and therefore identify with, commodities is constantly thrust into the faces and phones of users of digitality through advertising, the behaviors of friends and family, and the sheer convenience. In a burnout society, cheap escapism dominates<sup>16</sup>. Actively involving oneself in and actively perceiving the world in an embodied way is difficult and time-staking. Finding little ways of subverting and being embodied in ways outside of the spectacle lends one to see that the spectacle need not be all-consuming.

Connections with people without digital images mediating these interactions are possible, even within the COVID-19 era, through writing letters and making food for neighbors or friends. By unplugging and opening pockets of interruption and silence, one can loosen the otherwise tight grips of the digital tools with which they have coercive relationships.

It is not possible to build convivial relationships, as Ivan Illich writes on them, with tools

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<sup>15</sup> Per German critical theorist Hartmut Rosa, technological developments have accelerated the pace of change in social institutions, which in turn affects the acceleration of time and makes members of society feel that if they want to avoid things getting worse, they must work and run faster. Wasting time becomes placed on a level with the deadliest of sins. See *Social Acceleration* by Hartmut Rosa for more.

<sup>16</sup> Byung-Chul Han writes on the phenomenon of burnout in his books *Psychopolitics* and *Burnout Society*, noting it as an effect of the psyche itself being exploited under the neoliberal regime (Han 2017, 30).

such as mobile smart phones because these devices are complex and require specialization (Illich 1973, 22). However, by making the effort to be embodied in non-digital ways whenever possible – such as taking walks through the woods without a mobile phone in tow, knitting, cooking food, and more – users can come to understand where their relationships are coercive and build pockets of enriched, fully-felt escape from the grips of digitality.



Chapter Three: Physical Interactions Between Digital and Flesh: Friction as Power

*Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick.*

— Anna Tsing, *Friction* (2004, 5).

*In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.*

— Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1984, 53).

Physical interactions with the digital can be as seemingly banal as holding a telephone and speaking into the receiver or as intimate as having a pacemaker inserted into your chest to regulate your heartbeat. This chapter is focused on physical interactions between the digital and the flesh and in particular, how through their relations with each other, asperity is devalued in favor of smoothness and efficiency. In *Saving Beauty*, theorist Byung-Chul Han writes on how smoothness, in both aesthetics and communication, is favored by neoliberalism because it streamlines the movement of capital, goods, and ideas (Han 2017, 20) In his *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction*, Mark Fisher puts forth theories regarding concepts such as the mediatized body, the hyperreal, and schizophrenic implosion of subjectivity. Focused on the blurring of the inanimate and the animate, he explores the Gothic horror of the body becoming-with digitality and how hyperreality is reality contaminated by fiction (Fisher 1999, 179). Building from my previous chapter and granularity, I present attendance to friction and asperity as part of my conceptualization of ‘granularity’. Considering concepts put forth by these theorists, I work with the horror of how human bodies have been becoming-with the digital in increasingly smooth, efficient, and

streamlined ways and, by considering friction as a source of eroticism and the erotic as a source of power (a lens that heightens feeling and sensitivity), I argue that an appreciation for asperity and friction in our cyborgian lives can illuminate coercive relations with the digital and create pockets for play.

### **Smoothness vs. Asperity**

In his book *Psychopolitics*, Byung-Chul Han writes on smoothness and its relation to neoliberalism, as smoothed communication encourages speedy full transparency (Han 2017, 30). Smoothness is present both in the exterior of digital apparatuses and in communication within the digital. The smooth conveys perfection and an agreeable feeling. Negativities and asperities are eliminated, as they contribute to obstacles to accelerated communication. Instead of discussion with nuance and difference of opinion occurring on social media apps, big technological corporations have success in retaining users most when users are met with advertisements and content that they ‘like’, as deemed by how users are *dividualized*. Thus, algorithms present products and services as tailor made for said *dividual* (Zuboff 2019, 17). Communication reaches its maximum speed when *like* responds to *like*. Difference and disagreement create friction, which is seen as an obstacle to the free movement of capital, communication, and commodities.

With much of life taking place on keyboards and touchscreens, users’ fingers are accustomed to the flat, 2D smoothness of keyboards and touchscreens against flesh. Thinking of granularity as put forth in the previous chapter, as aesthetics of digital apparatuses emphasize sleekness, ease of use, and customizability, the grains and relief of life go missing. For instance, the Apple iPhone comes in colors from lavender to rose gold to deep red, giving consumers a feeling that their iPhone is particular to them while

efficiently selling products. Through patterns of conspicuous consumption, technology becomes obsolete within years if not months. Users of technology passively accept that perpetual change and obsolescence is a feature of the world in which they live (Kurlinkus 2018, 166).<sup>17</sup>

Compared to smoothness, asperity is not easily commodifiable. Rough, pock-marked skin is not deemed as desirable as smooth, poreless, waxed skin. However, sensitivity to roughness is significant for appreciation of materials ranging from fabric to food (Aktar 2017, 181). Roughness is only one way of comprehending differences in texture; slipperiness, stickiness, and dryness are other examples of how textures can be assessed. Textural sensitivity, particularly sensitivity to asperity and roughness, informs tactile relationality. This critique focuses on asperity and roughness, as they generate imagery of grains and granularity that can be recalled. In this way, asperity and friction aids in understanding moments when sensitivity is piqued.

In her book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Anna Tsing focuses on “global connections” using what she calls “zones of cultural friction” which arise from encounters and interactions. Tsing writes that the conditions of global connections come to life in ‘friction’, in the moments where travel is held up by insufficient funds, late trains, security searches, etc. (Tsing 2004, 5). Friction is not necessarily safe, as it comprises what Tsing lists as the “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing 2004, 4). In the terrain of imperialistic extraction across the globe, bodies and states clashing in moments of friction can be

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<sup>17</sup> In chapter 6 (“Nostalgic UX: Designing for Future Memories”) of *Nostalgic Design*, William C. Kurlinkus considers what leads to memorable design in a world where tech is constantly shifting. See this chapter for more.

dangerous and lead to the loss of lives. Globalization encourages a vision of the world in which everything is smoothly part of one imperial system, in which goods, ideas, and people move pervasively without impediment (Tsing 2004, 5). The phenomena of standardization and homogenization, as Illich writes about them in *Tools for Conviviality*, figure here. Stabilized, or smoothed, production of “highly rationalized and standardized goods and services” would bring society even further away from convivial production than the industrial-growth model (Illich 1973, 108). Global connections can be made powerful through friction<sup>18</sup>, but also through attention to where friction is, global power is revealed to not operate as a well-oiled machine (Tsing 2004, 6). Friction can reveal the stickiness of engagements between two things, whether the digital and human or extractive imperialist forces and environmentalists.

We began this chapter with a quote by Anna Tsing on the rubbing of two sticks together. This metaphorical image and the friction within it highlights how heterogeneous, awkward, rubbing interactions can lead to new arrangements of culture and power (Tsing 2004, 5). The movement of power, through goods, ideas, and people, need not be unimpeded. In reorienting towards friction and asperity, these two are not upheld as desirable or to be sought after, but instead the texture of life is attended to. Attunement to the textures of life, as seen, felt, heard, and smelt in the clashing and rubbing of bodies (any combination of states, humans, the digital, animals, plants, etc.),

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<sup>18</sup> Anna Tsing writes about how forest destruction and environmental advocacy clash in Indonesia where forests were destroyed and extracted for products taken for the world. Friction is required to keep global power in motion, but also it gets in the way of the smooth operations of global power. In this globally-extractive, imperialist sense, it is not that friction should be highly valued, but it *should* be explored for what it exposes. See *Friction* by Anna Tsing for more.

builds political power in the sense that it reveals how interwoven these beings are and how the behaviors of one have implications, sometimes dire, for the other.

### **Friction and Asperity as Erotic Power**

In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” Audre Lorde writes, “the erotic is not a question of only what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde 1984, 49). The digital dampens the erotic as there is an emphasis on productivity and instant gratification. Instead of experiencing the scent and physical of the Other (any Other), communication through verbal and visual means becomes primary. This results in an affect marked by a lack of warmth, as users are met with the cold smoothness of a screen or the keyboard instead of the warm, textured skin of a lover or friend with blood pumping through their veins.

Women have been taught to be suspicious of, and therefore, suppress the erotic as a resource, strength, and tool towards consciousness (Lorde 1984, 49). The erotic is a form of non-rational knowledge centered around ‘feeling’. Attempts have been made to reduce the erotic to pornography<sup>19</sup>, but unlike the erotic, pornography’s “uninterrupted presence of the visible destroys the imaginary” (Lorde 1984, 50; Han 2015, 7). Eroticism is not as image-dependent as pornography, but rather sensorial in a deeper way. Lorde writes that once women begin to feel all the aspects of our lives deeply, we demand from all our pursuits that they feel in accordance with that illuminating joy, leading to a certain

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<sup>19</sup> “Cyberporn” as a category has opened up thought on how it might generate new forms of eroticism and affectivities, unlike the porn that existed prior (Uebel 1999). This particular article uses erotic in a way unlike Lorde; focused on masculine sexuality (which Lorde does not dismiss, but her eroticism is particular to her feeling as a woman. Expanding on definitions of eroticism would be interesting, but takes us away from our focus here on friction and rubbing as erotic. Here I will stick with the erotic as power.

responsibility to ourselves (Lorde 1984, 52). Tapping into the erotic means tapping into the chaos of strong feelings, into life force (Lorde 1984, 49). An attendance to the erotic and a value for friction colors life with an energy that heightens and sensitizes all experiences. This is a crucial aspect for political energy and life, as collectivity through multiple linkages can be built on shared, full, granular feeling.

### **Divide Between the Flesh and Digital?**

Is there a divide between the machine and body? Need there be? As Donna Haraway puts forth in her “A Cyborg Manifesto”, the cyborg is a creature of social reality (Haraway 1991, 149). Any seemingly clear distinction between the flesh and the digital is an optical illusion. The cyborg is a conceptual tool to visualize how interconnected the human body is with the digital, the earth, and all it is embodied with(in) (Haraway 1991, 149). Haraway does not see cyborgian subjectivity as liberating, but instead as an effect of dystopian times and a way to look for play within said dystopian times. Instead of ideating some utopian landscape away from the entanglements of pollution and digitality, Haraway finds room to play with the interconnection between the flesh and the digital (and other matter, for that matter). Cyborgs are ubiquitous and invisible (Haraway 1991, 153). We, anyone and everyone who has organic and technological components, are all cyborgs by virtue of living in the world.

While appreciating the border blending of the human body and the environment it is situated with and in, the body should be claimed as a site, albeit an unstable one. Claiming the body as a site has risks such as essentializing or reifying it into categories as if they were predetermined. Violence is done when authorities ascribe rigid identity markers onto bodies based on what is perceived in categorical senses, rather than what

the subject claims. For instance, this sort of marking and biometric failures have led to the sanctioning of additional surveillance and scrutiny of transgender people when travelling if they do not cohere to binary gender norms (Shabbar 2018, 198). Many feminist theorists have and continue to attempt to claim the body while appreciating its porosity and fluidity, such as Stacey Alaimo in her book *Exposed*, who puts forth a concept called ‘trans-corporeality’. Trans-corporeality encapsulates the understanding that the borders of the human body, and other bodies, are porous and informed by the context and material conditions said body is *in-corp*-orated within (Alaimo 2016, 124). Even pre-digitality, bodies are incorporated in environments that affect their composition, position, etc. in ways that cannot be disentangled (Alaimo 2016, 112).

The point of having, and claiming, a body is that it provides a well from which to move through the world and affect and be affected. In *How To Do Nothing*, Odell writes that “As the body disappears, so does our ability to empathize” (Odell 2019, 24). Similar to the critique raised in this thesis, Odell’s conception of the body is one that is ambiguous. As explored in the previous chapter on perception, in the flow of late stage digital capitalism, image (and audio, to a lesser degree) are given primacy in lieu of the other senses. Understanding the trans-corporeal body as a tool through which to move in and with the world is vital. Whether living on a damaged earth or not, our bodies affect and are affected with and by material contexts.<sup>20</sup> The connection between the senses and the ability to ‘make sense’ of the world is essential, as the senses are how we perceive and therefore interact with our surroundings (Odell 2019, 24). Sensitivity depends on

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<sup>20</sup> The term ‘damaged earth’ is inspired by Anna Tsing’s *Art of Living on a Damaged Planet*. It is an assemblage of essays by scholars in art, bioinformatics, ecology and more on the collaborative art of living and dying with other species in entangled ways.

senses. How attuned our senses are to the textures, colors, and aromas of life the more we are sensitive to critters we interact and engage with (Haraway 2016, 98).<sup>21</sup>

### **The Gothic Horror of the Meeting of the Digital and Flesh**

When thinking of the trans-corporeal body as a site, sensing in a way that is attuned to as many grains of life and the intra-connections between the world and body is key. A phone is a sort of sensory deprivation chamber, as the smooth, streamlined interactions between the flesh and the digital become normative. There are moments in which I am granularly aware of my own body's becoming-with digitality, becoming with my personas online, and becoming with the smooth keyboards as I type, and I find it troubling and horrifying. From a queer theory and cyborg theory's perspective, abjection is often where resistance and alternatives are born. From this angle, abjection need not be something to turn from, but something to turn to in order to understand how the human body can be transitional. Recognizing the body as transitional and affected by interspecies bodily entanglements would mean recognizing that there is no coherent, stable self as put forth by the concept of individualism (Ahuja 2016, 9).

Mark Fisher defines the *Gothic flatline* as a zone of radical immanence in which the animate and the inanimate can no longer be differentiated. Within the *Gothic flatline*, to have agency does not necessarily constitute being alive (Fisher 1999, 2). To Fisher, the cyberpunk is a signal that all perception is a matter of bodily stimulation. By affecting the body with drugs, television, books, and social media, one's reality is altered.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Critters' is a term used by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* that encompasses the human and non-human beings of the earth (and maybe beyond). Critters are invoked not to specify *what* they do, but to enlarge the capacities of all the players thickly present in and on the earth. See *Staying with the Trouble* for more.



Mark Fisher references the science fiction body horror film *Videodrome* (1983) to illustrate and exaggerate how the animate (human) and inanimate (cyber) merge. The protagonist of *Videodrome*, directed and written by David Cronenberg, Max Renn is president of a trashy television channel. He is hungry for new content to pull viewers in and in the midst of desperation, he stumbles upon a television program centered around inflicting gratuitous torture called Videodrome. Human and machine both transform throughout the film, such as a television set pulsating as if it's breathing (Fisher 1999, 72). As he falls under the control of Videodrome, a portal of sorts emerges on protagonist Max Renn's torso, in which a VHS tape can be inserted to further control him. Clever and grotesque, *Videodrome* accentuates the blurred relation between porous human bodies and media, as Max's body merges with the digital machines and the machines become controlling and humanlike. Media not only puts images in our brains, but affects us materially and physically, changing the composition of 'reality' as we would otherwise know it. The human becomes the digital and the digital becomes the human.

The gothic body horror of this film creates a sort of friction, horrifying the viewer into uncomfortable awareness of how human bodies are intermeshed with machines. Interventions as such alert users to the ways in which virtual reality and digitality have reconfigured the human body in new ways. These need not be all gory, torturous ways like in *Videodrome*, but the horror serves to emphasize this reconfiguration.

### **Revaluing Disagreement: Against the Currents of Normative Digital Flow of Late Capitalism**

Our late capitalist digital society, increasingly a society of verbal and visual spectacle, is increasingly one in which people are held at a distance from each other

mediated by and through images and the written word. As explored in chapter two, through people's coercive relationships with their mobile smartphones and Internet use, the smooth touchscreen becomes a place of consumption. The smartphone and algorithmically-mapped sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Netflix and Amazon produce what one *likes* because that is what is profitable (Han 2015, 2). This encourages agreeability as a value in control societies and capitalist technology shift's people's expectations and the flow of information. Agreeability is profitable because it encourages people to go along with the normative digital flow of late capitalism. Big technological corporations extract energy and behavior patterns from Internet users who consume in accordance with the way they are *dividualized*.<sup>22</sup> With algorithms handing people exactly what they 'want', people who use the Internet regularly are molded in such a way where they don't know how to reckon with disagreement without taking it personally.

A risk of agreeability being valued in society is that it maintains the status quo. Evolving, growing, and imaginary new thought depends on behavior that is risky, dynamic, and sometimes contradictory or disagreeable. In Wendy Brown's *Regulating Aversion*, she analyzes tolerance as a strand of depoliticization in liberal democracies (Brown 2018, 4). Tolerance is a mechanism of depoliticization in the sense that it can construe marginalization and subordination as personal and individual, rather than dispensing the political analysis and solutions they require. Rather than sweet, benign niceness, agreeability can indicate an inability to reckon with the disagreeable or what is uncomfortable for one to face. When you become comfortable with the disagreeable, you

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<sup>22</sup> See Shoshanna Zuboff's *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* for more on how surveillance capitalism means a struggle between capital and each one of us users of the Internet, as surveillance capitalism extracts every part of human behavior.

do not require the approval of society or peers in order to do what you otherwise deem as correct.

Kin-making and investment in people feels risky. As a result of the smoothening of aesthetics, communication, and instant gratification, major commitments that could lead to injury are avoided in lieu of smaller, less time-consuming or risky-feeling investments.<sup>23</sup> As digital society prioritizes smoothness without friction or negativities such as risk, Han writes that, “Libidinal energies are distributed across many objects, like capital investments, in order to avoid a total loss” (Han 2015, 33). The dispersal of one’s libidinal energy across many objects can make desire less accessible. Desire in this sense is understood through feminist theorist Kristyn Gorton’s work on theorizing desire as something that creates recognition, affects lives of characters, and transforms people in ways that can be experimental and inventive (Gorton 2008, 19-21). Injury, and the risk of it, have their importance; the discomfort of anxiety and risk indicates that one is exposing oneself to something (some body, some event, some thought) that might affect, and in turn, transform them. Coalition building and kin-making are informed by this appreciation for how bodies affect and are affected. Changes in thinking can be sparked by pain, fear, discomfort, and injury. Politically, this emphasis on instant gratification risks people being unable to commit sustained energy to actions, projects, or movements that could actually make the changes that people symbolically want. and do not need to face them in order to.

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<sup>23</sup> Informed by Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* and Alan Badiou *In Praise of Love* overall, I contend that there is no love without risk of injury, whether through the risk of abandonment or the sheer agony of Eros (Barthes 2010, 43; 194). The two pages cited specifically mention risk, but overall these books support that love is fraught with risks. See *In Praise of Love* if interested in more.

There are disagreements worth contesting, such as ones rooted in racism, bigotry, sexism, transphobia, etc. Aside from these worthy opponents, life is nevertheless abundant with moments where things do not as one hoped or planned. A confrontation with a different opinion or philosophy of life is not inherently a criticism of the way one lives. Learning how to not only cope with, but appreciate the nuance and color that these disappointments, hiccups, and interruptions bring to life is fruitful because, facing disagreement can challenge one's values, behavior, and perspective – therefore, fortifying them.

### **Play and Art Between the Digital and the Flesh**

Embracing discomfort and friction are key to finding pockets of pleasure and resistance, as resistance is constituted by friction. In *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell writes, “The happiest, most fulfilled moments of my life have been when I was completely aware of being alive, with all the hope, pain, and sorrow that that entails for any mortal being.” (Odell 2019, xx). An embrace of friction, textural rubbing, and asperities provides pleasure and political potential in that we become aware, through feeling, of how we are constantly affecting and affected. Instead of attempting a full-refusal of digitality, staying with the friction-filled, unsmooth, rough trouble informs how we can learn to live with the damage in a way that appreciates collectivity and helps us avoid resignation.

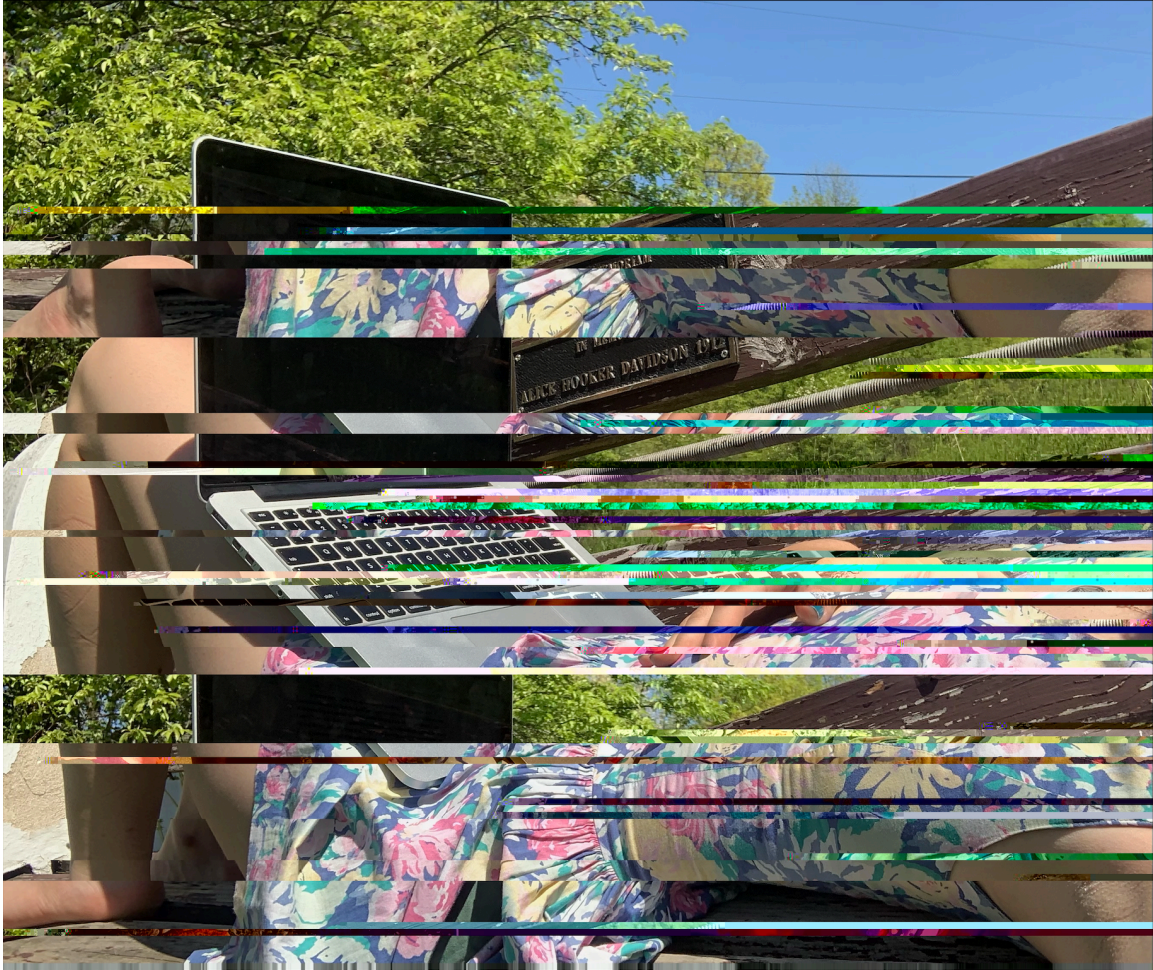
An appreciation for friction can take the form of slowing down. In *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell writes on the project *A Refusal* (2015-16) by American Artist. The artist replaced the content they would have posted on Instagram with blue rectangles. If followers or viewers wanted to see what the content that would have been posted is,

they had to request an in-person meeting with the artist. Russell writes on how this artist withdrew their labor from these platforms by refusing to input behavior data, *dividualizing* data (Russell 2020, 140). To me, this project also signifies a slowing down, an appreciation for inconvenience and physicality. Through this project, the instant gratification of seeing a piece of art on Instagram or Twitter, ‘liking’ it and moving on with one’s day is subverted, de-smoothened, and de-flattened. Instead of relying on the efficient digital economy, the audience slows down and is inconvenienced in a way that ultimately produces more friction and investment of feeling and energy.

Similarly, glitch art has revealed a space to play between the digital and the flesh. In her project *Queer-Alt-Delete*, theorist and artist Andie Shabbar makes glitch art without any sophisticated software by converting a digital image file into a text file (.jpg to .txt). Then, she deletes or adds new data. Then she saves it back into an image format, rendering a visual glitch (Shabbar 2018, 197). This method is called databending. Shabbar conceptualizes the virtual in a Deleuzian sense of something that does not exist prior to the actual, but instead coincides with it, acting and reacting to and with it (Shabbar 2018, 200). Her art is a response to “biometric recognition technologies that aim to fix the body within rigid identity categories” (Shabbar 2018, 198). In the space between this chapter and the next, I include my attempt to follow her instructions and make glitch art using a self-portrait of myself lying on a bench in the sun at the Vassar Ecological Preserve with my laptop on my lap.

As Audre Lorde writes, “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (Lorde 1984, 53). This is

crucial to politics. When we feel deeply, we share deeply with our kin, other humans and non-humans. We feel how we affect and are affected, and it emboldens us to live a life of collectivity. We grab the yolk and bravely participate and affect, instead of banally being-made into *dividuals* and letting the algorithms of big technological corporations dictate what our lives will be and what we will pay attention to.



This glitched self-portrait emphasizes how unstable, inter-spliced and intra-spliced my physical body is with the ‘natural’ environment, the digital, the past and the future. I was situated on the Vassar Ecological Preserve, a site that houses much plant growth, including the Poughkeepsie Farm Project. I am dressed in a vintage Laura Ashley dress that had a full life long before my own. I purchased it through an informal economy mediated by a digital application (Depop).

The growth of the soil pairs with my own flesh and the laptop, as symbolic of the interconnection of the digital. Unseen, but enmeshed, in the photograph is my mobile smart phone through which I captured the digital image. The phone made this bucolic, fleshy, cyber scene visible.

Interestingly, and incidentally, the name Alice Hooker Davidson (who is honored on nearly every bench on Vassar’s campus) was retained through the glitching process. This gestures towards historical situatedness, more far-reaching into pasts and futures than if the plaque were not to be included.

Glitched Self-Portrait  
Nina Salvatore

taken on Apple iPhone and glitched on a MacBook Pro

## Chapter Four: Digital Friendship as a Non-Capitalist Space

*Friends do not share something (birth, law, place, taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship. Friendship is the con-division that precedes every division, since what has to be shared is the very fact of existence, life itself. And it is this sharing without an object, this original con-senting, that constitutes the political.*

— Giorgio Agamben “*What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays.*” (2009, 36).

This chapter is a look into digital friendship both as a non-capitalist space and as an expansion and deepening on the notion of community. The question of how to live together and share meaning in the world is vital to political action and life itself. Generally, I consider friendship as a phenomenon that evades capitalism and commodification. Theorizing sociality and both the affect and relation of friendship is key for political thought because it informs how people co-exist and commune with and through each other, the earth, and cyberspace. Friends, not under the purview of the law or the capitalist market, care for, celebrate with, and support each other. Capitalist economic relations obscure sociality and interdependence, instead emphasizing the person as an individual (Gibson-Graham 2006, 83). In addition to these effects of the market, with digitality as coercive as it is, big technological corporations (like Facebook, Amazon, and Netflix) extract energy and behavior patterns from Internet users, *dividualizing* them as representations of their data, extracted and separated from them. Understanding friendship as the affective dimension of community should be focused on and developed, as opposed to the essentialization that risks occurring when communities are premised on identity categories that are understood as unified and stable (Franklin



2006, 102).<sup>24</sup> When friendships are sustained and created through the image-saturated, smoothed, *dividualizing* landscape of digitality, how can granular proximity be retained? COVID-19 has highlighted how interconnected human life is with banal dangers in the everyday, such as the rampant spread of invisible diseases or how dependence on capitalist, global supply chains can wreak havoc when global travel is suspended. In the basic routines of everyday life, it is easy to fall into traps of objectification of and supposedly division from other human beings, the land, and the digital.

With the primary affects of digitality being smoothness, efficiency, and speed, the grains of friendship risk being flattened to mere “followers” or “Facebook friends”. The political danger of this is that users are not encouraged to do the work of connecting across difference, as plenty of people with common ‘likes’ are accessible with great ease. As material social worlds are reduced to flat networks of social media, a certain depth and granularity of relations is lost. I argue for the importance of room for open-hearted, unpredictable connections, linkages charged with friendship, not based on sharing something (birth place, law, taste, etc.), especially as people are held at physical distances from each other as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter I consider philosophies of friendship, paired with J.K. Gibson-Graham’s theorizations of community economies and Iris Marion Young’s politics of difference, to quell the limits of community – instead orienting towards increased intimacy with(in) the world.

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<sup>24</sup> The cyborg destabilizes binaries such as between human and machine, material and immaterial. This points to a politics of affinity as opposed to identity. See p. 102 of Seb Franklin’s “Notes on Digital Community and Revolution” in which he summarizes Haraway’s deployment of the cyborg.

**Community: Its Limits as Monolithic and Its Benefits to Build On**

In digitality, paradoxically both individualism (or *dividualism*) and connectivity are deployed (Franklin 2016, 101). By the very act of using the web, users are *dividualized* (reduced to the data they create by using the web), but also put in touch with countless ‘publics’ and other users, across geographic space, time, and linguistic barriers. Digital community is limited by how it can rely heavily on subjective categories that get taken for granted and limited to binaries, as communication is optimized and smoothed for digital platforms. Pluralistic, supportive, discursively-constituted iterations of community can easily be lumped together with invocations of the word community that refer to an essentializing, exclusive, monolithic center.

Historically, the concept of community has been beneficial in coalition building across marginalized groups and in sustainable economic practices. Communities have often been where political and social movements have begun to emerge and political movements advance their causes by connecting within communities. For example, the Black Panther Party’s community activism worked in tandem with their revolutionary violence to advance education, health care, and criminal justice (Kirkby 2011, 25). To build on these politically constructive aspects of community, it is imperative to emphasize community as pluralistic. In “Let’s Talk about the Weather: Decentering Democratic Debate about Climate Change”, Australian theorist Bronwyn Hayward explores the utility of a decentered deliberation in the context of climate change, considering Young’s concept of ‘linkages’ in lieu of a more monolithic community (Hayward 2008, 80). Since many environmental issues are decentered in space and time, involving actors situated in different jurisdictions and institutions, the notion of some

kind of stable, community taking on these problems does not cohere. When the efforts of combating a decentralized problem are robustly centered, others who are not included into the fold of that center are distanced, whether it is geographically, linguistically, economically, or socially. Through a focus on multiple linkages, the work and spirit of community, characterized by affinity, can extend outwards and reach further networks in a decentralized democratic way. Despite connecting users who are at geographic distances, digitality encourages only surface-level, pixelated, non-granular connections, and extracts information from them as they interact.

The capitalist market framework seeks to situate individuals as separate actors, obscuring economic and social interdependence between people, between community members. The word community as used in neoliberal Western contexts expresses the desire to overcome this individualistic situation and difference, but the fuzzy warmth of it is often predicated on “already constituted subjects who are brought together in a constructed oneness” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 85). Rather than relying on a constructed oneness based on “already constituted subjects”, which assumes a reified consideration of identities, J.K. Gibson-Graham turn to how social and community economy can lead to recognition of economic interdependence. In this way, social and community economies are distinguished from the mainstream economy in the way that they are diversified, cooperative, oriented towards the local market, socially embedded, dispersed, and decentered (Gibson-Graham 2006, 87). Gibson-Graham gesture to how the economy can be resocialized, including a recognition of how our own existence at every level is the effect of the labor of others (Gibson-Graham 2006, 88). In this way, the act of laboring

has an inessential commonality as a force of solidarity that connects people whether they recognize it or not (Gibson-Graham 2006, 88).

Donna Haraway distinguishes between identity and affinity in the context of cyborg worlds writing, “there has also been a growing recognition of another response through coalition – affinity, not identity” (Haraway 1991, 155). The distinction between identity and affinity is that when human beings are brought together through affinity, they are brought together not by blood or genes, but rather by “the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another, avidity” (Haraway 1991, 155). My understanding does not differ from hers, in the sense that affinity is a way of subverting what otherwise are often considered to be naturalized, categorical identities.

Iris Marion Young writes, “The impulse to community often coincides with a desire to preserve identity and in practice excludes others who threaten that sense of identity” (Young 2018, 734). Young, appreciating both the virtues of community and its limits (when assuming a monolithic coherence), develops a mode of social relations and politics that stems from positive experiences of city life. She writes that city life has the potential to represent heterogeneity rather than unity, through “(1) social differentiation without exclusion, (2) variety, (3) eroticism, and (4) publicity” (Young 2018, 734). Appreciating difference while reveling in shared experiences without striving for a ‘common’ lends human (and non-human) connection to open-heartedness and intimacy that does not *rely* on having a ‘common’. To Young, life composed of clusters of “people with affinities—families, social group networks, voluntary associations, neighborhood networks, a vast array of small “communities” is how we go beyond community (Young 2018, 734). Through thinking of coalition and community building through multiple

linkages, an openness to difference as an openness to the foreign is created. We, human and non-human, build life together through affinities, through differences, and through, what I add, friendships.

### **Theorizing Friendship: Through Time and Across Space**

Per Giorgio Agamben, “friend” is a class of word that is non-predicative, meaning it is impossible to create a class that includes all the things to which the word is attributed; rather, one knows what friendship is when they feel it (Agamben 2009, 29)

Late-stage, digital capitalism has produced a dominant attitude, and discourse, of productivity. Even in interpersonal relationships, as friends become ‘accessible’ 24/7 at the touch of a button through speedy, smooth applications like Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, avid users can end up concerning themselves with what message to send, or what picture to post that could be productive socially. In Agamben’s words, Aristotle’s thesis on friendship is “it is not possible to have many friends; that a distant friendship tends to lead to oblivion, and so on” (Agamben 2009, 32). Taking interest in the point that a distant friendship tends to lead to oblivion, I wonder whether distance refers to the physical distance or lack of communication, or both. As I write these lines in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which held loved ones at least a six foot distance from each other for approximately a year (depending on what state borders said people are residing within). Friendship has been characterized as a proximity “infused with an intensity that charges it with something like a political potentiality” (Agamben 2009, 35). If this proximity is held at a physical distance, what kind of spiritual proximity or political potentiality is possible?

As a result of COVID-19, formal institutions and convivial spaces have mostly shifted online, mostly using platforms like the video chatting application Zoom, Facebook, and Google. Technology as such has become a lifeline, a way of seeing your loved ones' faces while at a safe distance, and this distance is important. Corporeal distancing is a sacrifice made in the hope that the intensity of human relations will be retained. Retreat into the private, domestic realm is simultaneously all many of us have available to physically do, but instead, the public eye is being brought into the private realm increasingly so with digital coercion.

While confined to the domestic, digital friendships allow people to tap into endless 'publics'. In search of communalizing online, there seem to be pockets of the Internet that encourage productive, funny, and earnest discussions. Using Twitter or Facebook almost operates as viewing a play every day, in which users participate, read each other, share stories, jokes, and insights. Whether users primarily follow people they know 'in real life' or celebrities or journalists or podcasters, seeing what people post everyday lends users to feel that they really *know* the people they follow.<sup>25</sup> One of my friends shared with me that social media conditioned her to live her life by a random algorithm rather than routine. Many people who otherwise would be in school or at work

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<sup>25</sup> In an interview I did with literary critic and fiction writer Lauren Oyler April 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, she clearly states that in her understanding, friendships that originate online are no less real than relationships with, say, members of our families. To me, this coheres; however, there are different textures, or grains, to these differently constituted friendships. As in, there is a *virtuality* that does not fully overlap with the use of the word virtual as in 'on the web'. *Virtual* relationships are relationships that are constituted by their *potential*. This is in contrast is friendships that are *actualized*, but to me, both are desirable and illustrate how expansive our friend/kin-making can be. As Proust said, 'Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract'" (Proust 1994, 208). The *virtual* proceeds the *actual*, but might not necessarily become actual. I am thinking of Henri Bergson here, and hope to expand on this project with this, but not now.

are bored and lonely, which a COVID-19 quarantine heightens. People are yearning and want to reach out, but because of how algorithmically-force fed people are so unaccustomed to doing things that make them uncomfortable. When I was living in Russia for four months in 2019, feeling disconnected from my loved ones back on the east coast of the United States, I joined an online book club on Discord and built life-long friendships. Discord differs from the structural design of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook because instead of ‘posting’, users elect to join ‘servers’ in which there are various ‘channels’ they can opt in and out of as they see fit. In this way, it is more of a chatroom or forum than a social media feed, making it more conducive to nuanced discourse, as you can directly reply and converse. The ease with which I made these Internet-based friendships made me wonder: are the expectations for communication with digital friends less high stakes because they are less implicated in one’s physical environment? This could be unfair to friends of mine who live thousands of miles from me, and our relationships. What we have built with and among our book-clubbing friends is not as solid as a monolithic community, but an assemblage of multiple linkages of friendship. Throughout the pandemic, our linked friendships, similar political thought, and shared sense of humor helped many of us cope with the isolating effects of ‘social’ (physical) distancing regulations across the globe.

### **Friendships as Uniquely Discursively-Constituted Intimate Human Relationships**

Jean Keller’s view of modern friendship is based on friends reaching agreements on the expectations of friendship through interpersonal dialogue between themselves as opposed to institutions and cultural norms governing friendship (Keller 2008, 160).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In this piece, Jean Keller applies Jürgen Habermas’ understanding of practical discourse to

Vitality, by engaging in discourses with each other, friends can help each other develop the cognitive and affective skills necessary to be effective participants in political life and discourse. Keller claims that of all intimate human relationships, friendships are the most discursively constituted because they do not come under purview of the law, unlike marriage and parent/child relations. Since friendship is a chosen relationship and there is discretion within friendship to determine the nature of the relationship, close friendships can serve well as models for the kinds of relations we aspire to (Keller 2008, 161). At the site of a perceived injustice in a friendship, practical discourse becomes key to mitigate the risk of dissolution. An everyday example of a perceived injustice is if one friend misunderstands the other's expectation of confidentiality, disclosing a private feeling of theirs shared in confidence with others. Depending on the severity of the infraction, this need not lead to the dissolution of the friendship, but expectations should be clearly communicated and hurt feelings heard out as to clarify understandings of boundaries.

In terms of practical discourse per Habermas, all persons affected by the potential norm must be party to the discourse (Keller 2008, 163). Within close friendships, this model of hermeneutics is relatively simplified compared to the complexity of operating in the public sphere where a large number of people are potentially affected. In this way, the links of friendship and the ability to have discourse among friends is encouraging of hermeneutic skills on a larger level. Nevertheless, it is plausible that people who already have a foundation of friendship would be more motivated to understand each other's

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friendship, sustaining that his theory can aid in developing a phenomenology of interpersonal relations.



values than they would a stranger's in the larger public sphere (Keller 2008, 164). Hence, a spirit of friendship should be intentionally extended outwards.

As digitality creates more pockets and 'publics' for friendship to emerge, the risk of enriched friendship becoming viewed as disposable in lieu of the acquisitions of 'followers' has frightening political implications. I call for intentionality and an appreciation for the moments of friction in which practical discourse emerges as useful to reassess norms and the well-being of persons within a relationship, be it a friendship, an organization, or a relationship. This idea of practical discourse does not assume that we interrogate potential friends about their expectations, but that considerations on the matter are made based on how they keep commitments, behave, and live up to their supposed values (Keller 2008, 164).

Divergent views on expectations of each other or what constitutes 'the good life' do not necessitate the end of any given friendship or kinship. However, fundamental disagreements about values or expectations test a friendship and make the dialogue of navigating said disagreements fraught with emotional risk. It can be tempting to avoid confronting betrayal, given this emotional risk. Ultimately, leaving one's own hurt feelings unaddressed can lead to more damage in a long-term friendship. Thus, a certain level of emotional maturity on the part of the different parties is required and these affective skills (such as honesty, the ability to listen well and respond clearly, sympathy, and feeling the atmosphere of a room)<sup>27</sup> can be further developed (Keller 2008, 175).

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<sup>27</sup> Thinking of *The Affect Theory Reader*, in Gregory J. Seigworth & Melissa Greg's essay "An Inventory of Shimmers", they write on how the 'what' of affect theory often leads to 'how' in terms of the rhythm or approach of a situation. Affect theory includes attention to contingency, attention to how different affects make us think, feel, write, and move through the world. Affects inform the angles at which we enter a room, and what those angles make us feel in said room. In

Young writes that her reflections on the politics of difference were brought on by “discussions in the women’s movement of the importance and difficulty of acknowledging differences of class, race, sexuality, age, ability, and culture among women” (Young 2018, 734). Affinity can be built within and across differences and through friction, the rubbing between people who may have some things in common, but have some differences. Keller goes on to build on how feminist friendship philosophers Marilyn Friedman and Martha Ackelsberg argue that friendships help facilitate each other’s moral growth and develop the empathetic and cognitive skills necessary to engage in public discourses.<sup>28</sup> Close friends support and guide each other through troubling situations, by listening as the friend decides what she should do or sometimes by providing advice (Keller 2008, 174).

These friction-filled interactions with friends demand appreciation for how there are other legitimate ways to view any given interaction. People, including close friends, often come from different backgrounds from each other and have different sets of affective skills and expectations for what a good friendship and a good life looks like. Since friends freely, more often than not, build relationships with each other and affirm each other, friendship can be an excellent model for how to understand and interact with others. With an open-heart and appreciation for unpredictable connections, friends are important to the growth of affective skills that contribute to one’s ability to engage in

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this way, affect is crucial to my project and arches over all of it. It is also why I emphasize the development of empathetic and affective skills.

<sup>28</sup> Marilyn Friedman and Martha Ackelsberg argue that friends can help each other increase the range of values they consider viable, provide recognition for value systems and personality traits that may go unappreciated in the public sphere, and allow the friend to get critical perspective on her own values (Keller 2008, 173). Keller herself contributes that conceptual skills and emotional intelligence also can be developed through friendships.

public sphere discourse. However, it is important to remember that friends are often people who are chosen on the basis of some similarity to oneself. Engaging in the political sphere and encountering persons with diverse ideas of what it means to have a good life further develops one's skills in navigating practical discourse (Keller 2008, 178).

Unlike Jean Keller, Iris Marion Young does not think we can understand others' experiences by imagining ourselves in their places. Instead, through reciprocity, one can respect and take account of the others' experience without assuming to understand their perspective (Young 1997, 41). Young conceptualizes reciprocity in terms of gifts and dialogue, thinking of how relations with others' and understandings of their experiences are fed by trying to understand someone across distance without substituting one's position for another's (La Caze 2008, 120). This reciprocity is often asymmetrical, such as when people have different life histories and social positions (La Caze 2008, 118). Attempts to imagine oneself in the place of the other can manifest as projection and cause damage through stereotyping, especially when a relationship between people is structured by oppression, (La Caze 2008, 120). Some critics of Young have claimed that she overemphasizes difference, which can lead to a certain probing, violating investigative mode that treats the other as exotic. Critics are right to be wary of this hypothetical investigative mode, as treating another as a specimen is violent, reductive, and oppressive. Instead, Young advocates for a respectful stance of wonder, and La Caze contributes that this wonder must be united with respect (La Caze 2008, 121).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Luce Irigaray reworked Descartes' notion of wonder in "Wonder: A Reading of Descartes, The Passions of the Soul" into a response to something unfamiliar that is more nonjudgmental (Descartes 1649, Irigaray 1993, 74).

### Extending Friendship to the Non-Human

In *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Arturo Escobar asks, “How do we recreate and re-communalize our worlds? How do we develop forms of knowing that do not take words and beings and things out of the flow of life—that is, forms of knowing and being that do not recompose nature as external to us, as dead or insentient matter? What kinds of rituals might we develop to this end?” (Escobar 2018, 200). Similarly, in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault gestures towards not the idea of a great community fusion, but rather an historic occasion to re-communalize in non-essentialist ways (Foucault 1997, 158). By opening up affective and relational virtualities, with virtual understood not as the digital but rather ‘the potential’, which runs parallel to the actual without necessarily preceding it, new aspects of the social fabric can come to light (Foucault 1997, 158). Considering this question of Escobar’s, I wonder how to make friends with the non-human, non-sentient in a way that highlights intra-connectedness, especially as they are *in-corp*-orated into our human bodies through trans-corporeality.<sup>30</sup>

To what extent can friend-making extend to the digital in ordinary practices and rituals of the everyday? Unlike friendship, which is notably not a coercive relationship, but rather discursively constituted and practiced, digitality is coercive in the way that it is thrust upon people in the 21st century for work, social interactions with non-immediately proximal loved ones, and as one of the most readily available means of (addictive) media consumption. Users of digital technology are *dividualized* by data collection and algorithmic-feeding of steady content, be it news, music, or movies. In

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<sup>30</sup> To review, trans-corporeality, a concept put forth by Stacy Alaimo, is a mode of understanding all creatures as intermeshed with the dynamic world. This concept advocates the model of the ethical subject as one who is rooted in the ordinary practices of everyday life (Alaimo 2010, 2-4).

spite of the ills of digitality, this digitally-saturated moment is an historic occasion to re-communalize in non-essentialist ways where possible, valuing affective linkages across and through differences.

As Ivan Illich differentiates between convivial tools and coercive tools, I put forth a working concept of friendly tools. Using the model of friendship as a way to communalize, to build affective skills, and to traverse expectations and boundaries of others, what could it mean to think of digital tools and systems in a friendly light? Due to the addictive design and coercive virtue of the digital, such as through mandatory work-from-home that takes place over Zoom, digitality cannot be understood as convivial. Conviviality may not be able to be achieved, but the relationship between phones and hands can be negotiated, similar to how friendships are discursively constituted. Similar to how Jean Keller outlines the discursively-constituted virtue of friendship, through attendance to when, where, and how relations between the digital and flesh are discursively constituted, new understandings of how to navigate the dystopian effects of increased digitality can come to light. As considered in chapter two, by unplugging and opening pockets of interruption and silence, one can loosen the otherwise tight grips of the digital tools with which they have coercive relationships. Perhaps the coercion cannot be overcome, but through attendance to friction and space for idle time, pockets where use of digitality can be negotiated (in terms of affect, duration, intention, etc.) are unveiled. Through this heightened appreciation of the grains and full-feeling creation and practice of rituals in every day can be negotiated, adjustments in boundaries and expectations of the digital can be made.

## Conclusion

This thesis started with the following question: how can collectivity be cultivated when digitality proliferates understandings of the self and of optics (particularly *appearing to have* something) as primary? When loved ones are held at physical distances from one another, how can the ubiquity of digitality as a means through which to close this gap be managed? What modes of pleasure and protest are possible when situated in image-based, *dividualizing* digital worlds? As total refusals of digitality are untenable under current conditions, to what extent is it possible to subvert the ills of digitality and make space for art and collectivity?

To work through these challenges, we started off conceptualizing disciplinary and control societies and their subjects, the individual and *dividual*, respectively. From there, Haraway's cyborg was introduced. The situation at hand is dystopian as the grains and textures of social life are flattened into pixels and 'likes'. The cyborg is a crucial concept to understanding how there is no total refusal or exit from the coercion of digital life and control. This being considered, a problem with uplifting the digital as a radical way to communalize and connect with political movements and other users in meaningful ways is that information is constantly extracted from users in *dividualizing* ways. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has created more physical distance between people's bodies. Relations between members of this cyborgian society are increasingly mediated by digital images, algorithms, and biometrics through social media, streaming sites, and shopping websites.

Chapter two attended to the problems of the digital, including favoring smoothness over asperity, the problem of spectacular narcissism, and 24/7 extraction. The

spectacle is one way that capitalism distracts and pacifies the masses and narcissism is proliferated by sites that cater directly to a given user's 'likes'. Unlike unilateral media such as television, film, and radio, social media grants users the ability to spectacularize and commodify themselves. Through situating the particular user's experience as primary, social media encourages flatness of perception of other people as complex, multifaceted, non-reified beings. Reification turns abstract, multitudinous into static representations. By catering to a user's preferences via algorithms that capture the patterns of said user's digital behavior, social media, and other aspects of the Internet such as video streaming sites, proliferate an understanding of the individual self as being spectacularized. In this way, narcissistic tendencies are encouraged by digitality in ways that can limit the scope of any given user's understanding of their interconnected with(in) the world, where they are not necessarily positioned in any center, but rather ingrained in the fabric of life.

In chapter three, I argue that an appreciation for asperity and friction in our cyborgian lives can illuminate coercive relations with the digital and create pockets for play. Working with Mark Fisher's conception of Gothic horror, we saw how the inanimate and animate merge, creating horror that should be attended to. By revaluing asperity and disagreement as something that has the potential to deepen nuance and fortify relations, we move against the currents of the normative digital flow of capitalism that favors the 'smooth' and efficient. An appreciation for the textures and friction of life, considering friction as a sign of interaction between bodies, sentient or non-sentient. This feeling is a reminder that we are not individuals, but rather embodied in material contexts and affective relations. Disagreement and asperity are signs to pay attention, to slow

down and to problematize. Friction can be a source of eroticism and the erotic a source of power (a lens that heightens feeling and sensitivity). This opens up room for play and art between the digital and the flesh, such as Russell and Shabbar's conception of the glitch as something that reveals how binary and essentializing biometrics are. Making my own glitch art from a photo of myself, I encountered an channel of appreciation for non-static, non-individual conceptions of personhood as amorphous and intra-connected with the environment and temporalities I was/am situated within, including but not limited to Vassar College, digital era, and the ecological preserve.

I present some degree of an antidote and ways of thinking about one's position in these coercive relationships, not a resolution program, or some kind of utopia. My practice in building, maintaining friendships and re-communalizing is enriched and informed by this theorizing. In an attempt to subvert the 24/7 speed of consumption and extraction, I deleted my Instagram account in 2019 because I saw how my friendships were being reduced to interactions such as 'liking' each other's photos. The relationship between theory and practice means that behaviors are implicated in theorizations. In this way, it is crucial to build affective skills and to comprehend different grains of touch, sight, thought, audio, and smell. One way I suggest building affective skills is through friend-making as discursively-constituted and something that can be extended to the human and non-human alike. Attunement feeds intuition and strong intuition gives one a sense of when is the time for contemplation and when is the time for decisive action. Both are needed for collective work. As we are affected, we also hold the power to affect. This thesis is a jumping off point to move away from spectacular narcissism and towards the cultivation of friendship in unexpected places.



To better understand the implications of this theoretical research, future work could be done in applying these concepts to art. Perhaps application of these ideas to paintings or novels could be an entry point for further development. Russian futurist paintings that incorporate restlessness and mechanic elements come to mind, as well as fantastical, feminist novels such as *Paradise Rot* by Jenny Hval, which deals with the notion of decay. A more comprehensive art project that does the aesthetic and affective work of the theory put forth in this thesis, such as a community mural at a site where members want to zoom in on, would enrich these studies. Research into these concepts would also be enriched by developing theoretical grains of senses other than the visual and by thinking collectively with/of particular instances of community-building that cultivate friendship across differences.

Spectacular narcissism deteriorates the otherwise granular, kin-like connections that can be made. Finding ways to live with the dystopian, cyborgian conditions of society, depends on members of said society making meaningful connections with others, both human and nonhuman. Ways of achieving this include orienting towards an ever-growing development of affective skills, retaining the right to disappear online, and deepening the granularity of one's perception. Whether someone loves the outdoors or finds city life more their speed, appreciation for the rhythms of life and how one is situated within life across differences is vital. It is important that we do not shy away from discomfort, but instead think with it and feel it – as to hopefully make informed decisions informed by our attunement to our embodiedness so that we find sustainable and uplifting ways to live and die together.

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