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# The Perilous Potential of the Blur: Digital Cultures Within Zones of Indistinction

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Given that digital culture supposedly emerges from the certainties of an on/off binary system of distinction, our current experience of it feels surprisingly indistinct. Certainly, in the intertwined political and technological contexts of the digital, the separation between what we might perceive as reality and fiction is increasingly blurred. Various political actors, from right-wing propagandists to vaccination skeptics, have indeed taken advantage of this moment of indistinction to sow seeds of confusion by fabricating alternative versions of social reality. They do so by weaponizing the affordances of networked media, and mobilizing what has been classified as disinformation warfare, fake news, or conspiracy theories. Our consensus reality, alongside the media, the university system, and its other crediting institutions, which shape our common frame of reference and help stabilize scientific and political facts, is being eroded and contested. Even if we respect the capacity of modern philosophy to test the concreteness of ideas of truth, objectivity, and reality, it is hard to deny that the political consequences of blurring distinctions between fact and fiction have proven troubling for e.g., liberal, leftist and environmentalist politics. For instance, institutes and think tanks funded by oil companies have

been repeatedly successful at instilling doubt in relation to climate change by distorting scientific evidence. This has, in part, helped to immobilize the full force of the environmentalist agenda, slowing down the introduction of various aspects of legislation. Along similar lines, alt-right online communities rely heavily on irony, which warps the distinction between mockery and earnestness, as a vehicle for disseminating a variety of xenophobic ideologies. The indistinctness of parody and sincerity online has become proverbial. According to the so-called Poe's law, a maxim of digital culture, any parody of extremist views will inevitably be confused by some readers for a sincere expression of the views being parodied.

Given these troubling political indistinctions, the focus of this special issue—the potentials of the concept of the blur—might seem counterintuitive. Surely, there is a need to rethink how our perception of fact can be sharpened as a tool against the fake. Yet, we have asked media arts practitioners and theorists to consider the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological usefulness and application of the blur in the study of digital media culture. This is because we are interested in exploring the various ways in which porous boundaries and zones of indistinction can be creatively employed for dealing with the often dangerous intricacies of our networked existence, challenging rigid political, aesthetic, and technological categorizations. This does not mean that we necessarily reject the idea of making clear distinctions, but we are nonetheless keen to investigate different modes of empowering entanglements and blurrings that might surprisingly bring reality back into the mix without the baggage of categorical separability.

The verb, to blur, generally means to make or become unclear or less distinct. As a noun, the blur points to a thing or an event that cannot be perceived clearly. Blurred images and concepts imply overlaps, collisions, interferences, nonlocations, vacillations, insensibility, inseparability, fuzziness, ambiguity, and even mess. Can focusing on these zones of indistinction

be productive in the already highly ambiguous domain of the digital? Is it not paradoxical, under these conditions, to suggest that we need to blur our vision to grasp the bigger picture? While acknowledging the dangers of losing detail, resolution, or definition, our contention is that blurred distinctions can offer a novel way of thinking about the complexities of digital media culture. We maintain that the blur is able to grapple with the messiness of networks, but also resists oppressive border regimes seeking to contain or capitalize on their potentials.

### **Blurry Politics**

A good place to start examining the political potentials of the blur is a compelling re-examination of digital political cultures provided by Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou. As a response to the efficient right-wing mobilization of networked technologies and their often unpredictable potential to disseminate propaganda, Komporozos-Athanasiou develops the concept of counter-speculations, which he understands as “struggles for visibility and obfuscation waged on the turf afforded by [networked] technologies” (123). Counter-speculations are left-leaning grassroots maneuvers that exploit the uncertainty and volatility of digital networks in order to blur the alternate realities established by right-wing populists and derail their agenda. Komporozos-Athanasiou offers instructive examples of these experimental maneuvers, which are in his view already in full effect. He discusses BLM's targeting of hashtags such as #AllLivesMatter, #WhiteLivesMatter, and #ExposeAntifa. By attaching random images and videos of K-Pop bands to these hashtags, BLM allies managed to hijack them and thus subvert the efforts of Trump's supporters and white supremacists to communicate and further their agenda. Similar cyber sabotage was orchestrated by teenagers on Instagram and TikTok, who in March 2020 circulated a call to disrupt Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They speedily

reserved more than three-fourths of the available tickets, but never showed up, which made the arena look spectacularly empty.

Komporozos-Athanasίου positions these counter-speculative tactics in opposition to those deployed by neo-populist nationalists. Unlike the latter, he suggests that counter-speculations “did not use technology to create a fake reality but deployed fakery to create ‘real chaos.’ They did not so much manipulate reality as tamper with an already existing ‘fakeness’ to turn deception on its head” (122). For Komporozos-Athanasίου, the political practices of these online tricksters are to be further distinguished from other progressive activist traditions represented by figures of the hacker, whistleblower, and fact-checker. Unlike sustained efforts of whistleblowers to expose the wrong-doings of their opponents, counter-speculations tactically weaponize the serendipities of our networked societies to muddle the messages of their opponents. In contrast to the highly developed and illicit computational skills of hacktivists, counter-speculations require a deep understanding of the attention economies but often rely on simple and wholly legal procedures. Different from fact-checkers, who require far more time and effort to debunk deceptive messages than it takes to produce new ones, counter-speculations are quick and move together with their targets. Betting on these disorienting online tactics, Komporozos-Athanasίου (123) asks if, in the era of hazy lines between reality and fiction, “this very blurring also opens up new paths for interrupting the disastrous cycle of culture wars” enabled by networked technologies.

The aim of further scrambling the already blurred consensus reality is aligned with the ethico-political aims set down by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project (*Anti-Oedipus, A Thousand Plateaus*), they suggest that the innate dynamics of capitalism are such that it ceaselessly blurs the distinctions that structure the

established order of things. Unlike pre-capitalist formations, which sought to enforce an unchanging order of things for eternity, capitalism depends on the continual (re)assembling of laboring bodies, raw materials, machines, and know-how, while seeking to continuously update and refresh consumer preferences. This unruly movement of capital is constantly eroding every established form of social organization. As the disruptive forces of this process escalate and expand, all conceptual and physical boundaries that organize our social world are put under pressure—these lines get blurred, scrambled, or displaced. With the rise of networked technologies, the proliferation of which is driven by the same capitalist process, these disruptive forces seem to have crossed another threshold. While the omnipresent and uninterrupted connectivity completely eradicates limits posed by distances and physical boundaries, our networked condition not only blurs reality and fiction, but also dissolves the separations between labor and surveillance, production and consumption, sleep and wakefulness, self and other, etc. Building on Marx and Engels' famous claim that under capitalism "all that is solid melts into air," Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the muddled blurriness of our era. They align this scrambling dynamic of capital with the process of schizophrenia.

While the erasure of said distinctions is often rightly associated with a great deal of concern, Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the emancipatory potentials of capital's disruptiveness. The scrambling of clear distinctions in their view undermines established structures of power. As effectively argued by Michel Foucault ("The Subject and Power"), power operates by permanently classifying individuals and phenomena into distinct categories.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault suggests that the notion of individual, a distinct entity separated from the nameless crowd, is indeed the basis for the operations of disciplinary form of power. He proposes that disciplinary power permanently "categorizes the individual, marks him by his individuality, [and] attaches him to his own identity" ("The Subject of Power" 781).

According to his famous example (*The History of Sexuality*), it is only after the category of a “homosexual” gets constructed by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical institutions that their disciplinary influence can take hold. Homosexuality is thus no longer merely an act but becomes a feature that deeply permeates one’s identity, and determines how one is to be perceived and treated. The medico-juridical practices and discourses then start to organize encounters with “abnormal” homosexual bodies, prescribe what they can and can’t do, and thus impose limitations on their capacities to act. The risk of clearly established distinctions should be thus understood in terms of their exposure to power and vulnerability to regimes of knowledge. Although our societies might privilege, as suggested by Deleuze (“Postscript on the Societies of Control”), *controlled individuals*, data banks of geolocation data, social media footprints, and shopping cookies, over *disciplined individuals*, these risks undoubtedly persist today.

Indeed, we argue that the oppressiveness of forced distinctions is intensified in the age of algorithms, recommendation systems, and personalized ads. Along these lines, algorithmic classifications, and the risks they pose, are forcefully critiqued by Kate Crawford in her *Atlas of AI*. Analyzing the operations of AI technologies, Crawford investigates the “epistemological violence [...] necessary to make the world readable to a machine learning system” (221). Accordingly, processes of datafication employed by AI systems, such as emotion recognition technologies, inevitably reduce the intricate complexity of our world. By categorizing our facial expressions according to highly contested classificatory schemas of basic emotions, these systems “oversimplify what is stubbornly complex so that it can be easily computed, and packaged for the market” (179). These datasets of classification become the basis for extremely unreliable predictions and evaluations, which are already employed for the purposes of screening job applicants, assessing students in education, or maintaining shopping mall security.

“Institutions have always classified people into identity categories,” suggests Crawford, “narrowing personhood and cutting it down into precisely measured boxes. Machine learning allows that to happen at scale” and thus, not unlike the medico-juridical complex of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, forces “a way of seeing into the world while claiming scientific neutrality” (220).

The emancipatory potentials of the schizophrenic process, which Deleuze and Guattari align with the disruptive forces of capitalism, should be understood precisely against the background of these oppressive classifications. While the paranoid forces of authority police the borders that define these classifications to safeguard the established order of things, schizophrenia induced by the capitalist dynamic constantly breaks away from these forced distinctions and muddles them. Being unattached to binary oppositions like normal and abnormal, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a schizophrenic can evade the functioning of power. In *Anti-Oedipus*, they dramatize this subversion of compulsory distinctions by providing an example of a schizophrenic being questioned by agents of social authority. When interrogated by a policeman, the schizophrenic “deliberately *scrambles all the codes*, by quickly shifting from one to another, according to the questions asked him, never giving the same explanation from one day to the next, never invoking the same genealogy, never recording the same event in the same way” (15). For Deleuze and Guattari, the movement of schizophrenia complexifies and blurs binary oppositions; it stuffs them with meanings by weaving a network of connections and undermines them from within. The classificatory categories in this way become over-stuffed and de-familiarized, which can effectively destabilize their organizing efficiency.

A similar kind of blurry politics is indicated by Hito Steyerl in relation to stifling algorithmic classifications (“Sea of Data”). In agreement with Deleuze’s claim that power is no longer a matter of just disciplining individuals, but also involves controlling individual datasets,



Steyerl adapts the famous Althusserian scene depicting the exercise of social authority with a policeman hailing a person in the street by yelling: “Hey you!” She suggests that when it comes to policing large-scale datasets, social authority corresponds to algorithmic operations capturing the signal from the noise of excessive data. These signals take the form of identified patterns such as dependencies, clusters, or anomalies. Yet, Steyerl points out that, like the hailing policeman, who creates the subjectivity of the subjected individual, algorithmic operations do not simply recognize pre-existing patterns, but in fact create them. In doing so, they establish groupings (for instance, statistical projections of gender, race, or sexuality), make predictions, or enable personalized clickbait. Steyerl suggests that another layer of political spam filter is added when these patterns are deemed improbable, which raises the suspicion of dirty data.

“Dirty data,” she explains, “are something like a cache of surreptitious subaltern refusal [...] to be counted and measured;” it is “where all [our] refusals to fill a constant onslaught of online forms accumulate” (“Sea of Data,” 6). Steyerl is convinced that, when it comes to online forms, the dirtiness of data banks becomes a reality as people, be it out of aversion, laziness, or incapacity, regularly provide inaccurate data. Yet, polluting databanks, blurring them by registering intentionally irregular or disruptive behavior into algorithmic visibility regimes, can be a political form of resistance as well. Along these lines, an instructive example of such tactical blurring of data is offered by Komporozos-Athanasiou. He discusses a tactical swarming of Trump’s online merchandize shop performed by a coordinated group of saboteurs who were “‘holding’ campaign merchandize products in online shopping carts and indefinitely suspending checkout payments” (122). Like the organized fake reservations of Trump rally tickets mentioned above, these maneuvers “fed the campaign bad data and corrupted its election database” (122), consequently blurring its reliability and usefulness.

## **Blurry Aesthetics**

We can trace a familiar disruptive aesthetic blur through a long trajectory in the arts prior to Steyerl's interest in dirty data. According to Adrian Stokes (qtd. in Williams 112), the "embracing or enveloping quality" of Turner's radical painting style, for example, is characterized by "indistinctness" and "loss of definition." The blur can be an unsettling literary tool too. Gatsby is an imaginatively presented illusive aesthetic characterization who remains purposefully blurred for much of Fitzgerald's book. Gatsby is a low-resolution figure, who like one of Roger Caillois' camouflaged insects, goes up against the rules of Gestalt perception, becoming blurred by assimilating the background into the foreground of the narrative. Challenging the perceptive rules of high-resolution imagery is also an aesthetic procedure that played an important role in the history of cinema. This gesture was, for instance, key to the Cuban Imperfect Cinema movement since it confronted hi-budget institutionalized filmmaking by insisting that "technically and artistically masterful [cinema] is almost always reactionary" (Espinosa).

The aesthetic potential of blur and low resolution has also been embraced by digital media arts. Again, Steyerl, for example, seeks to redeem lossy compression with her concept of a poor image; a highly circulated and reproduced digital image "often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur" (Steyerl, "In Defense of a Poor Image"). She suggests that this concept allows us to explore the tensions between the commodified consumption of viral images and their excluded visual economies. Prior to Steyerl, in the early days of media art, the remixability of the blur tool in graphic software marks what Lev Manovich considered to be one of the richest elements in his new media language (qtd. in Fuller 123). Like the lossy compression techniques used in JPEG, the blur tool works by lowering the distinction between selected pixels and

assimilating them into an indistinct image. Here again, we see how the detail of the image can become diminished in the blurring process with differing outcomes. On one hand, then, similar to the use of depth of field in cinematography, the graphic blur is a powerful attentive technology of distraction. It works by obscuring certain parts of an image so that the graphic artist can attract the eye toward more salient regions. On the other hand, though, we can see how Gerhard Richter's paintings of blurred photographic materials aim not to distinguish between salient and nonsalient objects, but rather, as Richter argues, to blur is a way "to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant" (qtd. in McCarthy) As follows, Richter's aesthetic methodology corresponds with Gary Genosko's "enemy of crisp synthesis" (96). It shows how the "fuzziness," and "muddiness" of indistinction can resist border regimes by sliding in between foreground and background; hiding like weeds in deterritorialized cracks. This is blur as a Deleuzoguattarian *Middle*.

Given its effect on media images, video, and audio, the blur tool is, it would seem, a matter of approximation rather than exactness. The blur not only helps us to imagine what is not in the gaps, but it also fills in these gaps! Indeed, like lossy algorithmic compressing of media files, the blur tool corresponds with interpolation. Significantly, unlike the selective evaluation of salient and non-salient pixels to control attention and distraction, interpolation anticipates the unknown value of pixels found in the gaps between known values. In other words, interpolation guesses what is in between, in the blur, in the middle; in the nonconscious of the network. This is a blurring that currently applies to both AI-generated images produced by DALL-E or Midjourney as well as text. Along these lines, drawing on an analogy between the blurring capacities of interpolation and recent interest in OpenAI's ChatGTP, Ted Chiang contends that the current wave of large language models used in AI function as a kind of "blurry JPEG" for

“paragraphs instead of photos.” Evidently, there is some potential herein to relieve some of the tedium of digital culture, since as Chiang points out, people are having fun with ChatGTP’s approximation of what is in the lexical middle space between describing mundane tasks, like finding a sock in a dryer, in the style of the Declaration of Independence, for example. However, these blurring tools are also prone to a more perilous kind of anticipatory digital media between, on one hand, the hallucinatory compression artifacts or outright fabrication of an AI imitation machine filling in the gaps, and on the other, the limitations of a human knowledge and fact-checking capacity that is, for the most part, nonconscious.

A more empowering aesthetic rendition of the blur is provided by Fred Moten’s writing on contemporary art and Blackness. Stirred by his encounter with Chris Ofili’s art exhibit, *Blue Riders*, Moten’s concept draws on his intellectual engagement with Nahum Dimitri Chandler’s paraontological reading of W.E.B. Du Bois’ question concerning why the Souls of Black Folk are made categorically separable from others. To be sure, there is already a blur in Du Bois’ response to his own question: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question” (Du Bois 7). Moten’s blur nonetheless dares to flip Du Bois’ “strange experience of being a problem” on its head by instead asking “what is not in between” (Moten 27) or where is the “nothing that lies between” (313). Pointing to Ofili’s intense exploration of the tonal depths of blue, Moten notes how the artist’s use of color becomes so “distilled” or blurred that it is “so black it's blue” (231). As a concept, Moten’s blur is an exemplar “phenomenon of indistinctness” (244); his “blue, black, blur” (313), becomes a significant “partition in refusal of partition” (246). It is a “general assertion of inseparability” which is still, nonetheless, a moving, “continual differentiation” (268).

Moten's aesthetic concern for what is "not in relation" is also evidently deeply political, and is, accordingly, mapped to Denise Ferreira da Silva's use of quantum entanglement as a conceptual resistance to relational separations that persist in, for example, the so-called "refugee crisis" between "citizens" and "strangers" (57). Silva's *Difference without Separability* is again, for Moten, an example of the blue, black, blur concept in action. In this political context, it is a blur, grasped as a mode of inseparability or nonlocality, which undoes the two defining elements of a Kantian program: *separability*, on one hand, and *determinacy*, on the other. In other words, inseparability challenges a methodology defined solely by the sense impression of known things, experienced in space and time, and categorized by way of quantities, qualities, relations, and modalities. We can see here how entanglement responds to a call to stay blurred! Indeed, as consummate versions of the blur, inseparability, and nonlocality can, according to Silva, ensure that "difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable estrangement, but the expression of an elementary entanglement" (65).

### **Blurry Methodologies**

The political and aesthetic trajectories of the blur already indicate several productive methodological and theoretical frameworks. A forceful way of mobilizing this methodological indistinctiveness is suggested by Deleuze and Guattari and their insistence on schizophrenic destabilization of clear conceptual distinctions. In opposition to a theorizing that paranoidly polices boundaries between categories and disciplines, enforces uniformity and hierarchization, and reduces difference to identity, schizoid theory seeks to generate transversal connections, permits conceptual mobility and segmentarity, and proliferates openings. The main aim of schizoanalytic theorizing is to unlearn (or disinvest) the conceptual boundaries that inhibit our capacity to act, produce and draw on this empowerment to further complicate and displace these

boundaries that organize and control our social world. It is within these schizoid zones of indistinction that Genosko locates what he calls “undisciplined theory,” a theory that constantly crosses disciplinary boundaries and blotches established categories. This special issue seeks to mobilize the power of indistinction to produce Genosko’s aforementioned “enemy of crisp synthesis” (96). It is our contention that this conceptual fuzziness is indeed necessary, as any prior insistence on clear distinctions might miss several key aspects of our networked existence. Accordingly, our perspective is aligned with that of Hillis *et al*, who emphasize “the necessity of resisting the imperatives of coherence and neatness when addressing [digital] phenomena that are complex, diffuse, and messy, and on incorporating some of this messiness into scholarly practice” (11).

Yet another way of methodologically approaching indistinctiveness is to repurpose Gabriel Tarde’s figure of the sleepwalker (Sampson). To mobilize the sleepwalker as a conceptual persona is to grasp the pre-personal interactions that are, according to Tarde, constitutive of imitation societies. From this perspective, Tardean societies emerge from a complex multiplicity of imitative interactions, which ceaselessly produce, reproduce, and transform themselves. What we might call Neosomnambulism, therefore, refers to the nonconscious entanglement of brains, bodies, and computers that exert influence on us even when we feel wide awake and fully in control. By focusing on this blurry intertwinement between sleep and wakefulness we might be able to rethink several distinctions central to digital culture, most of which are seen as induced by networked technologies. One such distinction is that offered between distractedness, often seen as bordering on sleepwalking, and protracted

periods of wakeful attentiveness demanded by digital labor.<sup>2</sup> Somnambulism draws attention to what precedes the distinction between sleep and labor, namely the collective nonconscious that is already operational in both of these states. As the work of influential experience designers and consumer researchers testifies, digital technologies are increasingly constructed to tap into this nonconscious register (neuro comfort zones), which shapes both our dreams and waking consciousness. Such an approach might allow us to engage with this register, and think through the multiplicity of nonconscious associations that connect and underlie networked subjectivities.

In Sampson's *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media*, the methodology of indistinctiveness is further expanded through the work of Caillois to advance a new materialist theory of mimesis. Through the lens of this theory, the blur between a foregrounded self and the backdrop of the other arises as a result of algorithmic operations that exploit the principle of homophily, for example.<sup>3</sup> These "lookalike" operations are embedded in lucrative social media marketing tools which produce and entrain increasingly similar user experiences. As follows, Caillois' innovation in thinking about mimicry is his suggestion that the blending of an organism with its surrounding is not a survival technique, but rather results from a disorder in perception, which opens up both perils and potentials. This disorder consists of the organism confusing its own body with its material environment, which triggers a disorienting destabilization of the inner sense of self. The *Sleepwalker's Guide* takes this idea forward to suggest that such

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<sup>2</sup> Johnatan Crary suggests that the distinction between sleep and wakefulness is in fact one of the few distinctions that have, until recently, remained stable. "In many ways, the uncertain status of sleep has to be understood in relation to the particular dynamic of modernity which has invalidated any organization of reality into binary complementaries. The homogenizing force of capitalism is incompatible with any inherent structure of differentiation: sacred-profane, carnival-workday, nature-culture, machine-organism, and so on. Thus, any persisting notions of sleep as somehow 'natural' are rendered unacceptable" (12–13).

<sup>3</sup> As explained by Wendy Chun, homophily is the idea that you are like what you like, and that you will like the things that people who are like you like. She claims that social platforms algorithmically generate their recommendations based on your likes and dislikes and suggest what others with similar (dis)likes were interested in. In this way, these algorithmic operations actively propagate segmentation with regard to these preferences.

contaminations of experience provide a materialist way of thinking about mimesis as it explains imitation societies in relation to the blending of physical borders, without prioritizing the sphere of interiority and representation. This insight provides a novel means for investigating the indistinctness cultivated by homophilic algorithms organizing social platforms, one that does not understand blending with others in terms of the interiorization of ideas. This suggests that the emerging indistinction between self and other is to be regarded “as a mode of access to preperception; a way of slipping into the insensible zones of user experience” (Sampson 7). It is an approach that sheds new light on Caillois’ methodological proposal that the primary aim of all study is to set about resolving distinctions, but also enables a reconsideration of threats and opportunities of these zones of indistinction.

The blur could also prove effective as a methodology to complexify the distinction central to our post-truth condition. As the *Sleepwalker’s Guide* argues, this distinction concerns a positivistic opposition between facts and fiction, which insists on the separation between truths and facts from feelings and moods. This distinction can be displaced by drawing on the thought of Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza suggests that, insofar as we remain passive, the “true” is simply that for which we imagine will enhance our affective disposition, and the “false” is that which we imagine will diminish it. Our discernment of what is factual is thus dictated by the multiplicity of previous affective encounters that we associate with the phenomena in question. This further suggests that the distinction between true and false can be bypassed *via* what Alfred Whitehead called the aesthetic fact. Whitehead muses that even the judgment of the sternest of logicians, who set out to establish if a given proposition is true or false, eventually gets “eclipsed by aesthetic delight” (qtd. in Sampson 12). As follows, Whitehead’s approach “challenges the positivistic distinction made between brutal facts and untrustworthy felt experience by arguing



for a *measurement of fact* founded on the intensity of experience,” which he aligns with aesthetic experience (13).

Another potent instance of the methodology of indistinctness can be found in the work of Susanna Paasonen, whose exclusive interview features in this special issue. Paasonen’s methodological approach foregrounds ambiguity and aims “to hold seemingly contradictory things together in dynamic tension [...] to understand that which it studies with sufficient degrees of granularity,” and attends to “irreconcilable tensions without the aim of resolving them [...] to grasp how things appearing to be diametrically opposed and mutually contradictory are in effect codependent or give rise to one another” (5). In her book, *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*, Paasonen uses this framework to challenge the dominant cultural analysis of new technologies, which suggests that we are addicted to devices and apps which distract us from boredom. To counter these reductive narratives of a digital downfall of humanity, she develops a nuanced approach, which examines dependence, distraction, and boredom as equivocal affective formations made of mixed feelings. Paasonen insists that negative and positive affective responses to digital media cannot be clearly distinguished, and suggests that “frustration and pleasure, dependence and sense of possibility, distraction and attention, boredom, interest, and excitement enmesh, oscillate, enable, and depend on one another” (4). By rejecting the binary division between addiction and agency, for instance, she argues that the use of digital media cannot be reduced to a simple pursuit of dopamine hits. Instead, our attachment to networked connectivity stems from the fact that we rely on it for managing school, work, and administration, creating and maintaining friendships and sexual arrangements, access to entertainment, etc. As such, digital media does not only cause frustration akin to withdrawal

symptoms when it breaks down but is in fact a precondition for a wide range of activities. This leads Paasonen to suggest that dependency should be seen as inseparable from agency.

Evidently, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach, which seeks to show that the traditional binary oppositions by which we make sense of our world, ourselves, and our technologies are always already blurry and unstable, gives us another way of foregrounding indistinctness. One of the ways that Derrida explores the instability of our conceptual binaries is through the classic philosophical notion of the *pharmakon*. According to Derrida, the *pharmakon* is a device that can function as a cure on some occasions and as a poison on others, or as both at the same time. A pharmacological object is, therefore, characterized by an indistinctness of potentialities, which challenges binary divisions such as that between good and bad, or curative and poisonous. In approaching technology from the perspective of pharmacology, Bernard Stiegler suggests that humans are constitutively reliant on different technical objects, which can inhibit or/and enhance our abilities. The technique of writing, for instance, has, according to Stiegler, provided us with a mnemonic prosthesis that grounds the very basis of Western rationality. Yet, he also suggests that this writing is simultaneously a source of inhibition as relying on external mnemonic support eventually gives rise to a decline in our capacity to remember and think.

As every technical object takes over and extends our cognitive and physical capacities, we consequently also stop exercising these abilities. Empowerment and inhibition are thus simultaneously inherent in our relation to technology. Yet, as rightly pointed out by Paasonen in our interview, when it comes to networked technologies, Stiegler's analysis remains startlingly one-sided as he insists that these technologies currently exhibit only hindering, toxic tendencies. As more and more of our capacities are outsourced to search engines, apps, and smart

technologies, Stiegler suggests, we face nothing but incompetence, discontent, and disaffection. While his work offers several useful perspectives on technology, his reductive account of digital media seems to be in need of a corrective. This corrective should do justice to the pharmakon as, to put it in Paasonen's terms, "a productive analytical tool foregrounding complexity, cohabitation, and simultaneity," which can help us move "beyond diagnoses [of networked media] lamenting the current moment as flat, lifeless, and pretty much doomed" (6).

### **Our Explorations of the Blur**

The contributions to this special issue explore the potentials and dangers of the blur from a number of different perspectives. As anticipated, the special issue features an interview with **Susanna Paasonen**, an accomplished interdisciplinary scholar whose work has been a lasting inspiration to us. Paasonen's work, which should not need an introduction, engages with a wide variety of issues linked to media culture, from networked affect to online pornography, and consistently displays rigor, ingenuity, and lucidity that renders her scholarship of the highest quality. An interview conducted by **Jernej Markelj** and **Claudio Celis Bueno** interrogates the notion of ambiguity that orients her work, and that provides a helpful perspective on the methodological usefulness of the blur. Paasonen discusses her uneasiness with the critical epistemologies of suspicion and the strong theories of oppression that they develop, a discomfort that spurred her interest in ambiguity. The conceptual framework of ambiguity is her way of blurring and ramifying these theories "so as to better account for the complexities within the phenomena studied." "As the multiplicity of meaning," Paasonen suggests, "ambiguity is a fact of life, and innate to cultural objects and phenomena, yet something that easily slips away in the cultural analysis unless one persistently holds onto the logic of *both/and*." Central to this special issue, her interview explores the blurriness of ambiguity and its effectiveness in analyzing

affective digital networks, politics of representation, algorithmic technologies, and other issues related to digital culture.

The practice-based contribution *Calypso Cave #itistrue* developed by **Stefan Karrer**, and curated and theorized by **Christopher John Müller**, offers an inspired investigation of the ways that technologies of image capture blur our perception and imaginaries of geographical places and spaces. Müller contextualizes their contribution by drawing on the still neglected work of German thinker Günther Anders, who suggests that the increased proliferation and dissemination of captured images also captures our imaginations. Anders claims that once technologies such as film and photography become the dominant means by which we store and curate our memories, our lives are no longer primarily lived, but mostly projected; that is, entrapped in the contemplation of images. *#itistrue* delves into these imaginary projections by investigating the online representations of Calypso's Cave located on the Maltese Island of Gozo. Karrer's and Müller's work builds on the database of over 4000 web-scraped images and their captions uploaded to digital photo-sharing platforms between 2004 and 2021 to trace the intricate confusion by means of which the imaginaries of Calypso's Cave start to morph with those of another Maltese cave called Tal-Mixta. By mapping this profound confusion, which is backed by Google Maps and continually reproduced by new images uploaded to Instagram and other platforms, Karrer and Müller wonderfully dramatize the role that the mediation of images plays in our perception of the world that we inhabit.

**Kirsten A. Adkins'** theory-based contribution "WHO ARE WE: The Blurring of Gendered Subjectivities in 21<sup>st</sup> Century British Military Promotion" focuses on the dangers of blurred visual aesthetics and ambiguity of meaning. She perceptively investigates how promotional videos aiming at recruiting soldiers employ out-of-focus images, conspicuous

omissions, and displacements to misleadingly frame contemporary warfare and the figure of the soldier. By closely analyzing the 2018 video by the British Army entitled *Who We Are*, Adkins demonstrates how the rhetorical and visual zones of indistinctions are mobilized to construct military collectivity and subjectivity in a way that is as abstract and vague as possible. As the blurred-out soldiers do not exhibit any clear identity markers, the video can, on the one hand, accommodate anybody, regardless of their class, race, sexuality, etc., to project themselves in the subject position constructed by the video. On the other hand, the blurred visual approach serves as concealment: it removes from view anything that could evoke the possibility of violence, injury, or death. Adkins' analysis of unstable images and ambiguous identities, which is informed by a wide range of productive theoretical concepts, also offers an insightful reflection on the blurriness of military gender.

The practice-based contribution "The Conspiritualist" by **Marc Tuters** provides an evocative exploration of the increasingly ambiguous contours of our consensus reality. He approaches this destabilization of the common frame of reference through the conceptual persona of the conspiritualist, which blurs the realms of New Age spirituality and conspiracy theories. Tuters' distorted video art portrays the current figurehead of this phenomenon, Russell Brand, an actor, and stand-up comedian turned YouTube current events commentator and holistic health guru. While Brand claims to be unconcerned with the left/right political binary, and does indeed often take a leftist perspective on economic issues, his selection of topics, together with his clickbait-y conspiratorial rhetoric, mostly seems to pander to right-wing audiences. This raises the suspicion that Brand's mixture of right-leaning hot-button issues and spirituality is ultimately motivated by entrepreneurial maximization of views and gathering of followers. Tuters' artwork channels Brand's business-savvy conspirituality into a series of screenshots, which, combined

with his original music, invokes the haunting allure of seeking truth and meaning in potentially troubling places.

**Jenna Ng** and **Oliver Tomkin**'s creative website wonderfully, and rather ominously, traces the blur concept through a trajectory of visual culture leading to what they call *The New Virtuality*. Echoing, to some extent, our point that the aesthetic of the blur is really nothing new, the arc of *The New Virtuality* seems to reach out toward an increasing indistinction between the virtual and the actual; a point when what is imitated, albeit in differing materialities, begins to merge into one. Here the antecedents and descendants of the blur are captured in the re-representational gaps between Magritte's *The Human Condition* series, the AI creation of "humans who do not exist", and politically explosive deep fakes. *The New Virtuality* is, nonetheless, ahistorical in terms of the break it presents with the past, where reality and illusion were once in sensible vacillation with each other, the virtual has now, it seems, violently slipped into an insensible real-time actuality. But what is conceptually at stake in *The New Virtuality* is a concern with the extent to which things can and cannot mix. Following an order of Platonic mimesis, as this essay tends to do, even where difference has disappeared, distance is destroyed, or boundaries muddled or violated; the gap always, potentially, reveals itself. The vacillation between the virtual and the actual is, as these re-representations suggest, a being that is always nearly there, but not quite. The copy constantly displays something that is never exact, some kind of ongoing violence. Forever incomplete, yet, perhaps, always becoming.

There are several zones of indistinction brilliantly located (if indeed that's the right word for an issue on nonlocality) in **Elena Pilipets**' insightful study of the "gestural virality" of TikTok. Drawing on former US president Donald Trump's worrying, yet wholly comical suggestion made during COVID that people could inject disinfectant into their bodies as a

possible treatment, Pilipets analyzes the gestural repetitions it stirred up. Like many other modes of digital contagion, and perhaps contagion in general, these Trump-inspired TikTok video memes were never going to be linear. They would never simply be repetitions of themselves! This is not a mimetic re-representation! Considered, instead, as a kind of memetic platform of production, there was never one feature of a TikTok meme that would basically replace another. Memes overlap each other, and as they do, they modify previous memes. Indeed, to study the “*distinct platform artifacts*” that engender these productions, such as the hashtag, the sound, the sticker, and the effect, Pilipets contends that we will need to follow the *indistinct* flows of “recommended videos, hashtag challenges, and memetic riffing.” This is not to say that the memetic blur is an utter mess. The virality of these shared gestures travels in between the absurd and the strategic; in between imitation and irony; in between shared nonsense, and the management of memetic association (attraction and distraction). What is particularly fascinating in terms of this special issue is that Pilipets’ blur describes an indiscernible blending of personal experience and collective expression in viral events. Again, this might be a universal mode of contagion, exemplified by one person’s illusory experience of separability that seems to obscure their inseparability from the cultural expressions of others.

**Alexander Wöran, Laura Ettel, and Isabella Iskra**’s contribution is focused on various conceptualizations that spin out of their experiences with the Archive of Digital Art (ADA). Herein, two general blurs emerge from digital media arts practices around questions of why, on one hand, media art is so hard to pin down, and what makes, on the other hand, a highly interconnected art practice “diverse and dispersed as a community.” The answer to both questions can be grasped, it seems, through the blurrings of transdisciplinarity that ADA has encouraged since its inception in 1999. For the purposes of this special issue on the various uses

of zones of indistinction, this is a very productive insight insofar as it evidences how digital art has managed to cut across disciplinary boundaries, including those partitions not simply confined to creative media arts practices, but venturing further outside of these inner parameters to bring in activists, journalists, theorists and researchers into the community. As follows, a “difficult to pin down” digital art seems to have produced just the “right amount of nimbleness and flexibility to transgress boundaries.” It can, as such, “explore new paths” and uncover new kinds of objects and relationships previously left undiscovered. Of course, like most silo-busting interdisciplinary ventures, there is always the risk that things become so blurred that a distinct area of practice might be impossible to preserve. To be sure, it is interesting to read how the blurs of digital art can produce objects that even resist archiving. But hey, don’t let’s get too hung up on that!

Finally, **Natasha Raheja**’s captivating practice-based study of digital media images presents yet another kind of “transboundary pest.” These pests are not exactly like those we might find in an archive. They are, after all, insects; locusts to be precise. But just because they are insects does not mean they are not media. Indeed, engaging with Jussi Parikka’s *Insect Media* thesis, Raheja’s conceptualization introduces a blurring duet, primed for the attention of media theorists. On one side of this double act, then, there is an explicitly visible insect blur produced when these initially solitary insects begin to swarm together. This is a process that biologists call gregarization; a process by which the solitary becomes a swarm. When filmed these swarms produce images not dissimilar to videos rendered using a motion blur tool. On the other side, the implicit operations of the blur resonate in interesting ways with our discussion above on Silva’s inseparability thesis. Raheja notes how these images of blurry swarms of migratory locusts not only collide with scientific jargon, but they also trigger farmer insecurity and nationalist rhetoric regarding immigration. In the latter regard, then, the locust swarm becomes a “slippery boundary



object.” In some ways, this rendering of the blur complicates Silva's thesis, as it further questions the affirmative power of the blur itself. To be sure, in order to resist the estranging forces of the separability of citizens and immigrants in the global rhetoric of the current “refugee crisis,” Raheja’s work reminds us that there is a further negative discourse of entanglement that needs confronting. That is to say, these images of swarming invaders need to be further transposed to an image of sociability, companionship, empathic associations, and gregarious mimetic communities.

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