CLOUT CONTROL

by

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B.F.A. University of North Texas, 2016

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA
2020
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5/15/2020
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2011, Robby Toles was performing for a mass audience on Tumblr during an adolescent age. Finding enough attention to reach over 10,000 followers, he experienced both the joys of affirmation and the perils of exposure. Almost a decade later, Toles is a multidisciplinary artist concerned with the individual’s relationship to technology and the self. He questions what the psychological and political effects might be on contemporary culture in an age that relies so heavily on images. Borrowing from consumer aesthetics and that of a curated lifestyle, Toles reproduces phenomena that existed for him on Tumblr, but are now widespread throughout social media.
Images of the Amazon wildfires are shared on someone’s social media stories; they expire 24 hours later along with their sympathies. Following the 2016 election, smiling selfies are posted with shirts that read “Fuck Trump.” After Mark Zuckerberg testifies before the Senate on data protection, memes about identity theft are rampant. Real issues with long-term effects are hollowed out by the individual’s preoccupation with the image of themselves as a concerned citizen. At the same time, phenomena that exist online influence the way individuals understand their relationship to themselves in the real world. This defines a contemporary crisis where our relationship with technology has destroyed one’s personal agency while we attempt to cope and fail to recover some form of control over our own livelihood.
Before we can dissect our relationship with technology today, we must remind ourselves of its very definition and origin. The ability or desire to communicate wasn’t born with these new devices, nor was it born with the first invention of pen and paper. We ourselves are technology, and we might consider this through the first handshake. *Nice to Meet You* signifies a, “greeting, introduction, a contract made, and an understanding achieved” (Pettman, 16). The handshake is a border two individuals cross which simultaneously affirms that one is different from the other. It is also one of the first movements that displays an inherent will to connect and communicate. The hand, then, is one of our first tools for being social beings. “For if the hand itself is a tool and speech a technology, then the human is always already a technical animal” (18). Of course, we have added many more tools since that have become our prosthetics much like our phones and computers that we can easily recognize as technology today – but are really just extensions of ourselves. Just as the shape of the arms and hands in the photograph are filled in by the same grid that is behind them, the ways in which we connect are through a saturated network of our own technology. Our bodies merge with the devices that mediate our communication. What was originally a simple handshake has now been obfuscated.¹

¹ The location of this coping and failure to recapture control is predominantly through the technology in which we are at issue with. On the internet - through photos, videos, etc.
From the industrial age to today’s fear of surveillance, artificial intelligence, and algorithms, the positives of supposedly making our lives easier have always come with a necessary and negative opposite. The advancements of our own technology are exteriorized into devices that create cultural anxieties throughout history. Safe Home Safekeeping displays an example of our increasingly complex devices that both help and haunt us. A black cylinder with its blue ring activated to let you know that Alexa is listening, ready to be of service. The glass tabletop attempts to let you see past the façade, only to show its solid reflection stretched without an end. Smart phones, smart speakers, watches, computers, tvs – devices we use every day - are a mystery to most users who don’t fully understand how they work under the surface. James Bridle uncovers specific truths and horrors about these opaque technologies, including a software named Mirai that, “brought down large portions of the internet for several hours on October 21, 2016” after targeting poorly secured internet-connected devices, just like Amazon’s Alexa (Bridle, 129). Attacks such as these are not uncommon, and the possibility of them happening to the devices that we keep closest to us and in our homes, where we are most vulnerable, makes our cultural anxieties about them legitimate. Yet, we continue to use them, as their

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2 Such a device could include the printing press. Despite being more efficient, the ability to create duplicates was a horrifying departure from the hand-made original and singular.

3 Bridle speculates the dangers possible to smart speakers and other smart home devices, such as
functionality as a tool undeniably makes our lives easier in many ways. As Bridle notes, “We cannot stand outside them; we cannot think without them” (2). The extensions of our own technological being have undoubtedly gotten out of the individual’s control, but it nevertheless continues to reflect our social behaviors. “Technology, while it often appears as opaque complexity, is in fact attempting to communicate the state of reality. Complexity is not a condition to be tamed, but a lesson to be learned” (134).

**COGNITION**

The state of reality is that we are reliant on both the media and mediation that these technologies provide. We share selfies on Instagram, jokes on Twitter, and vlogs on YouTube. We receive our news and information from television, websites, and social media. We communicate directly with our phones and computers through messaging applications and video calls. The extent to which we are using digital technology today is necessary to maintaining all of our relationships as well as our own appearance. As a result, our devices and the applications on them are paramount to how we understand ourselves in the world, which is increasingly online. Due to the recent coronavirus outbreak that has most of the world in a pandemic, the home security cameras and locks, smart thermostats, and fire detection systems. He admits this might sound like an imagined science fiction fever dream or conspiracy theory, but cites rogue algorithms that crashed stock exchanges and online marketplaces as previous encounters that could just as likely become a household reality.
need for digital mediation has dramatically increased. Now, social functions like parties are hosted on the Zoom video communication platform - the same location one might have a work meeting, family discussion, or even a romantic date. Trapped in the current situation, all that we have are digital media and mediation to guide us forward. As Bridle states, “Nobody decided that this is how the world should evolve... but we built it anyway, and now we are going to have to live in it” (239). We, like the figures in Retrofitting Our Spatiality, are consequently clouded by our own technological being, strutting and jogging in place to the tunes of our own existential dread. On the left, Video Killed the Radio Star plays and reminds us of the fears that accompanied the development from new types of mediation in video, outdating that of radio. Stayin’ Alive plays on the right, claiming our everlasting presence despite facing life-long adversity. Both songs, released in the late 1970’s, are brought back in a vaporware remix to display their ongoing relevancy forty years later. The past is collapsed with the present; the figure, foreground, and background are flattened into one plane, and two geographically distant images are made mere inches away from one another. Time and space are abstracted in these two videos, mirroring the blurred boundaries of an individual’s daily life experience. The more our lives are mediated by external technologies, the less agency one has over their own cognition, making it difficult to discern living from working, politics from parody, and even one individual from another.
HOW ARE WE DOING?
With a global crisis in COVID-19 occurring among already existing political tensions, the virus is exposing how people are using social media to cope with issues out of their control. While journalism might cover the severity of the pandemic, social media approaches such a time with facetious humor. Some memes envision contracting the dangerous virus so one might be able to skip work, and others are less sinister, joking about struggling with social distancing. As Marcus Gilroy-Ware rightly points out, “...there is every reason to believe that when a society is less happy... people are more likely to seek out pleasure and comfort, and the dysfunctional behavior of its members in order to do so will begin to increase” (24). The flippant reactions to large-scale catastrophes, political turmoil, and viral controversy by way of memes is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the meme devalues the gravity of a serious situation, and on the other, they offer emotional relief from a feeling of collective powerlessness. Gilroy-Ware refers to this as filling the void, in which the desire to soothe and distract from emotional distress on social media as a whole must be considered a “form of consumption similar to that of other pleasure-oriented consumables such as junk food, alcohol, drugs, and pornography” (35). Every new day and corner we turn, it seems a new crisis is born, with varying weight, over which we have no control. This is not only applicable to the current pandemic, but to life in late-capitalism at large. Gilroy-Fare explains how this is not only harmful to the individual, but beneficial to a capitalistic
separates the few with agency from the majority without it, humor found in social media becomes both the temporary coping mechanism and extended fixation. From this view, memes are a prominent fetish for many. Much like a fetish symbolically substitutes the lack of a penis, memes substitute our lack of control. Scissor Me Timbers and Just the Tip depict this relationship between fetish and meme directly by mapping the social media image onto a castrated phallus. The content of the meme's legibility is distorted but still recognized as meme, and the same goes for the computer generated dildo that is still recognized as a penis. Simultaneously confronting the anxieties of absence while providing the relief of humor, memes paradoxically become the fantasy despite knowing that it is nothing but fantasy. Just as we are presented with new reasons to continue to be emotionally distraught on a daily basis, the photographs assert that memes are always-already providing relief while reminding us of our imminent dangers. The meme-wrapped phallus precariously sits and hangs while being threatened by blades that at any moment might snap. Surrounded by liquid, we see the masturbatory behavior of this fetish. Always at danger, but always preoccupied with pleasure. In other words: we know very well, but nevertheless.

Companies derive wealth and value from promising temporary reprieve from the emotional distress it causes, and social media are companies that contribute. For more, see Gilroy-Fare, Filling the Void 106-108.

Gilroy-Fare goes into further detail by explaining that social media content gives out a dopamine release that produces pleasure and causes us to seek more. He claims that our constant relationship to media has desensitized us to positive effects. For more, see Gilroy-Fare, Filling the Void, 52-56.

What Gilroy-Fare titles Filling The Void coincidentally reflects Sigmund Freud's concept of the fetish. Gilroy-Fare also makes the connection to Mark Fisher's Depressive Hedonia, which makes a direct connection to the pleasure principle. For more, see Gilroy-Fare, 104-106.

When we are overwhelmed by the inability to fully take charge of our lives, the prospect of managing one’s own image becomes an enticing compromise. Posting selfies, sharing photographs from a night out, and creating a stream of images linked to one’s account simulates power over how one might be perceived. The accumulation and publication of moments, relationships, outfits, haircuts, and so on are synonymous with one’s character and persona. A saving grace in pursuit of individual agency, technology and social media have instead allowed the performance of identity, creating an opposition of the feeling of power and experiencing loss.

This relationship is analogous to Sigmund Freud’s story of Fort-Da, in which a child exercises their ability to cope with loss by controlling a back-and-forth game with their mother. In this game, a child repeatedly throws a toy away saying, ‘fort’ (gone), and retrieves it due to their parents aid saying, ‘da’ (back). By turning the unpleasant absence of their mother into a pleasurable one because of the toy’s return, the child learns to cope by mastering the situation. Parallel to the child’s game, the Fort-Da video diptych extends boomerangs, a feature native to Instagram’s stories, into a longer repetitious loop. Two seconds move forward and are lost, ‘fort’, but are captured and returned, ‘da’. This immediately accessible visual effect embodies the feeling of becoming a master of our own situation.

While this might exist outside of the context of social media, digital technologies have explicitly granted users access to remove, enhance, edit, and finely tune what this performance looks like. It is not merely the outfit that one might wear, but the time allowed to perfect this identity.
In this case, the *Fort-Da* videos double the mastering; the foreground holds the traditional two second boomerang format, and the background is on a delayed 5 minute forward and reverse loop. Not only does the boomerang give the individual power over time, but nature as well. Both the foregrounded dog and branch, animal and nature, perform plausibly repetitive acts, but instead become the toy to the individual’s command. As the story goes, so too does the gratification of the boomerang turn into
a game of control to help cope with an even greater loss. For the child’s displaced feelings onto the toy were fundamentally about the absence of his own mother, our displaced feelings onto the boomerang are about the individual’s loss of authority over their own livelihood. For example, when the 2020 Super Tuesday polling lines in Texas reached upwards of 7 hours long, individuals might feel like a master of this situation with the boomerang’s control over time and presentation, but in reality the severe wait remains the same. According to Freud, the game was so successful that the child was able to cope with the death of his mother a short time later. It makes sense, then, that when we are reminded about elements of our life that are out of the individual’s jurisdiction, we are prepared to respond relatively well by keeping ourselves busy. Having editorial control over boomerangs, profiles, and our appearance simulates power, but is merely an aesthetic consolation. While many are losing their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic, at least we have the ability to endlessly edit, post, delete, repost, and curate our identities. Our struggles are not limited to this pandemic, and not always as widespread or even as serious, but we are always aware of them. Social media trains us to use their core functionalities as an outlet; to play with time, to post images that reflect the lives we wish we had, and to vent. Once again, we know very well, but nevertheless.
WHAT ARE WE DOING?
In the midst of a crisis that forces the individual to constantly confront and attempt to cope with the state of reality, participating in online phenomena, at this point, feels like a necessity as much as it is a fetish. Consuming images of the lives of others online, extravagant or otherwise, brings forth an inherent desire to own the same objects, adapt the same behavior, and take on the same appearance of others. Rene Girard argues that this is fundamental human behavior in his conception of mimetic desire. For Girard, when people desire, they are actually mimicking another’s desire of the same object. Rather than a direct relationship between one and one’s desire, this relationship is triangular, creating competition and rivalry. When images of friends, sponsored advertisements, influencers, and brands are merged into one endless timeline, we begin to not only mimic other people, but we also imitate businesses. Even the phrase, “that is very on brand of you,” signifies the normalization of individuals looking, speaking, and behaving in the same language as the competitive capitalist system we live in. We act out Girard’s belief that desire and rivalry rise together, forming insane crowds, now made astronomical by the amount of people online. When a few artists are seen to be successful on social media by running an independent Etsy-style shop for their creations, many more feel the need to follow their lead in hopes of becoming financially independent as well. Blanket Statement Grab Bag makes an advertisement for this exact behavior. Many of us, like the individual who appropriates slogans to sell on a web
store, seek a competitive edge over others. While we would love to believe that our desire of making money on the merits of our creativity is our own, Girard would argue that this path of income is precisely because others are already pursuing the exact same thing. Blanket Statement Grab Bag also emulates graphic design and marketing trends, by reassuring the audience that the posters are high quality because of the artist’s care and capability as well as the premium materials used. Our imitation of other people, artists, and brands that imitate other people, artists, and brands push our identity away from that of an individual and closer to that of a corporation. As we strive to create and sell independently, we are hardly independent in our effort. Instead, we and the objects we create are merely a copy of a copy of a copy. Jean Baudrillard argues that this level of exponential mimicry creates a carnival of mirrors to the point that images have “no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum,” (6). Posters that include phrases from, “live authentic” to “yes we can” empty their conviction and political power by replacing reality with their re-presentation, their image, and their spectacle. Randomly picked out of the bag, we might receive one of these

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9 Much like competing for the same job that is in high demand but low in supply
10 In this case, I mean both corporation in the commercial sense as well as a group of individuals that make up a collective.
posters with a negative reaction depending if the message aligns with our morals or not. The issue is that we believe in images so much that we are convinced these posters represent real politics or ideologies. As Baudrillard would argue, the posters are “completely purged of a political dimension,” and, “like any other commodity,” they are “dependent on mass production and consumption. Its spark has disappeared, only the fiction of a political universe remains,” (26). The poster holds no real power; it does not change legislation or enforce policy. The poster is only an image that reminds us of another image, without ever reminding us of any specific foundation. When we try to have a political impact by purchasing these objects and sharing them online as a badge of pride, we might express our political frustrations or inspirational outlook, but don’t take any real action. The poster stands in as a cosmetic statement without enforcing the message it claims to advocate for. Posters, t-shirts, hats, and other reproductions of generalized statements are only superficial markers that mean the same thing: nothing at all. Reduced to pure images, they are all blanket statements.

HYPERREAL

We live in a world made of images that are pure simulacra. Images alone are influencing our daily activities, how we understand politics, and how we perceive ourselves. When everything in our lives are mediated by images, displaces power and meaning.
we enter the hyperreal, a Baudrillardian state where the difference between reality and representation are broken down, blurred, and indistinguishable from one other. Baudrillard’s definitions of simulacra and the hyperreal are best described by his contrast between Disneyland and Los Angeles. For Baudrillard, Disneyland is a representation of American values distilled into a miniaturized theme park version of America itself. From the massive crowds to the brought-to-life characters, the park has no root in reality, only imitation. On the other hand, Los Angeles, a real city, is emblematic of images, cinema, fashion, and appearance. Both rely on representation and multiplication of images, but Baudrillard argues that simulacra exists so that it, “conceals the fact that the real is no longer real,” (13). Los Angeles, much like the rest of our new reality, rely on images to construct the world we live in. We see the world through images, and we experience our daily activities through their simulacra. We might go outside for a walk for the sole purpose of publishing a video online about it. Spending Quality Time, Together, a triad of videos, takes advantage of this phenomenon. Turning a personal event into a pseudo ad campaign, these videos simultaneously question their own existence by displaying their emptiness. One video reads “WINTER 2019” and “IT WAS A SATURDAY” with an animated design in the middle. By combining the language of a seasonal clothing collection, a broad statement about a specific event, and the color palate sampled from the footage created that day, the video removes the real experience and inserts imitated branding. Another video questions, “how much time do you
spend looking at a screen,” as the words slither around the frame with a red gradient flashing on and off, begging to be watched. The question requires looking at a screen to read, a screen to make, and a screen to project. For a series of videos that is about a hike, this animation argues that screens forgo the individual’s activity. For Baudrillard, this is the precession of simulacra. In the third video, “If you don’t share your experience, did it ever happen?” is rhetorically asked in the same vein as a tree falling down in a forest with no one around to hear it. In this case, we are left to wonder if our real life experiences are as real as we thought, if they aren’t recorded for others to see online. Slow motion videos of a dog, a fuzzy sweater, a stream of water, and a tree’s bristles quickly cut and seamlessly loop. Much like Disneyland’s caricature of America, the clips check all of the boxes of what a hike might include, “embalmed and pacified,” (12). Together, these videos depict the colonization of the real, in which simulacra completely takes over our perception of the real, and gives rise to the hyperreal. We choose what to do in a day by our desire to make images, and our belief that they mean something. We see the world as an opportunity to make images, through the lens of cameras and screens of the devices that our hikes will play on. In this way, the hyperreal is not a science fiction narrative like The Matrix describes, but our new reality that is entirely dictated by the preceding presence of our images.

Baudrillard uses the idea of a terrain and its map that is so precise, we understand the geography from its image before we even step foot onto the land. See Baudrillard, 1.
We are hypnotized by the spectacle and simulacra. It is, after all, a hyperreality of our own construction. They are our images, experiences, and selfies. We fully believe in them. Entirely fixated, we hang motionless. We are Narcissus, who sees his reflection, falls in love, and continues to stare in vain despite realizing that it is only an image of himself. Obsessed and determined, we perform exhibitionistic narcissism by repeatedly publishing our images, and imitating others. Immortal Beloved borrows the format of an amateur vlog dedicated to its Youtube audience and reimagines it as a romantic production for the singular recipient. Resembling a picnic at the park, the video reveals its digital flatness while attempting to create depth from different angles. Obviously green screened, the figure and his picnic blanket sit directly on top of a grass field. Periodically switching between a center frame, and two from the side, the video simulates an entire area that three different cameras might simultaneously be recording. This constructed setting resembles the hyperreal world we live in, with “incredible proportions but without space, without dimension,” (13). Much like an instagram caption thanking everyone for following, or the end of a Youtube video, Immortal Beloved gives thanks to their audience for watching. Simultaneously speaking to everybody and nobody, we, much like the figure in Immortal Beloved, sit in front of our devices to record ourselves speaking to an audience not present. As we do so, the traditional relationship between subject and object are destroyed, only leaving the subject to speak directly to the device that reflects their own image back to them. Immortal Beloved exposes how our preoccupation with the image of ourselves has turned language itself into a tool of self-admiration. By reciting Ludwig Van Beethoven’s 19th century love letter, Immortal Beloved proves that narcissism is a feature that comes with external technology, preceding digital mediation, and therefore fundamental to our own technological being. Beethoven uses the rudimentary technology of pen and paper to express longing addressed to an ambiguous non-object, ‘Immortal Beloved,’

EXHIBITIONISTIC NARCISSISM

14 https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm

15 This is not limited to recording, but writing as well.
just as we would thank an absent group of followers. Consciously or not, Immortal Beloved is a stand-in to make us believe in Beethoven’s romantic longing, but ultimately his name, his image, is the only thing that becomes immortalized. Just as Beethoven stared down at the technology he used to write a letter, and Narcissus stared down at the pond to speak to his reflection, we stare at our devices, becoming infatuated with the extension of ourself. When we smile, it smiles back. We often see its tears when we weep our own. When we reach out to touch, it ripples away. We, like the figure in the video, are caught up in a drunken dance with our mirror image. Stuck in this trance, we fail to snap out of it, and continue to suffer.
WHAT ARE WE LEFT WITH?
Instead, we require an awakening and consciousness to the reality that we live in. We must realize the difference between the aesthetic performance of change, and actually pursuing it. The hyperreality that Baudrillard proposed only extends as far as the faith we put into the images we create. Becoming aware of this allows us to pursue the necessary means of change. As James Bridle says, “we are not powerless, not without agency...we only have to think, and think again, and keep thinking, (252). We can choose who is in office, limit corporations from destroying the planet, or companies from taking our private information. We have the abilities to take control over our livelihood once again. With a departure from our image, we may recapture our voice.

There is plenty to be fearful of with the growing and unseen dangers of advanced technologies, coronavirus wreaking havoc on the world, and a political climate that hurts more people than it helps. Times are tough, and the polarization of power and control only increase the difficulty for many. Social media content like memes provide a sliver of emotional relief, but become addicting in order to maintain the effects. Controlling one’s identity online at first seems like a compromise, but is essentially a lesser-than consolation to cope with our state of reality. We know very well, but nevertheless we continue to engage in dysfunctional behaviors to help relieve our distress and distract from our ever-present struggles. In doing so, we mimic others and re-design already existing phrases so that our signature can be rewarded. We share images of political merchandise so that our values are seen. We go on hikes for the opportunity of its documentation being observed on our Instagram account. We thank people for following, just so we can see our image become immortalized as someone who had the attention of others in the first place. Freud and Girard maintain that these are the foundations of human psychology. Baudrillard adds that the multiplication of digital mediation clouds our understanding of reality, and thus, what power and agency even mean. When our technological being, accompanied by our psychological nature, is disseminated into machines, devices, images, and accounts, we might feel that we are in a mass hysteria.
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2020