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Creative Control: digital labour, superimposition, datafication, and the image of uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will peruse a specific cinematic example of an uncertain-image, i.e. that of the film *Creative Control* (Dickinson B, dir. 2015. USA: Ghost Robot | Greencard Pictures | Mathematic | Magnolia Pictures | Amazon Studios). My interest in this film lies not, or at least not per se, or not solely, in its representationalism, but rather in its capturing of various kinds of uncertainty, to which I will here attend by situating the film against the backdrop of three different, yet interrelated, problematics related to the ubiquitous presence of digital imaging technologies: i.e., first, the concerns over digital or immaterial labour and the loss of eros; second, the use of contemporary cinematics (and the superimposition effect in particular) to address these and other issues related to living in ‘information-intensive mixed-reality environments;’ and third, the film’s own suggestive counter-image, which is that of the characters’ partly defection, and, arguably, that of the image’s own withdrawal from the world.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary cinematics; superimposition; disconnectivity; uncertain-image; digital labour; withdrawal; digital imaging; connectivity; augmented reality; Creative Control

What does it mean for an image to be uncertain? Can we speak of an image as of a person, being uncertain in the face of future events? Does the uncertainty *belong* to the image, as the use of the adjective in ‘uncertain image’ (the topic of this special issue) suggests? Or does it relate to whatever it depicts or projects, so that it becomes an image *of* uncertainty? Does the image’s uncertainty pertain to its relation to truth, so that it can be said that the image is uncertain when it is fallible, when it cannot be relied on, remains unknown or is indefinite? Or, does it concern its relation to clarity, so that one can say the image is uncertain when it is unsharp, unfocused, blurred, or

grained; when it is noisy, glitchy, or perhaps just vague? But, then, what to make of images that are crisp and clear, sharp and focused (as in my example below)? Are those, by consequence, necessarily certain—even if, for example, they circulate in excess?

Or should we shift registers altogether, and think of the image’s uncertainty not in terms of representation form, but, rather, in terms of the ongoing processing of data, or its machinic circulation in complex networks and data aggregates, so that we could argue that the image is uncertain when it contains imperfect, unknown or unknowable information, and/or obscures the processes whereby it translates,

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or indeed captures, real-life experiences, objects and events and converts them into exchangeable algorithmic datasets? One of the most consistent uses of the term ‘uncertain image’ I found online when doing research for this article, interestingly, came from image registration, i.e. the process whereby various data sets are transformed into one coordinate image. Here, the term ‘uncertainty’ is used to refer to the spatial and temporal differences that occur *between* images, which is critical to the detection of change in, for example, medical diagnostics, cartography, astrophotography, and so on. This raises the question what the temporal direction of the image’s uncertainty is. Does it pertain to the past it cannot capture or contain; to the future it fails predict; or to the space that is opened up in-between those two, its present-ness so to speak, in which a plethora of temporalities may come together in an ongoing process of emergence that nonetheless is imbued with past grids and imagined futures?

But what, then, of the ‘image’ in ‘uncertain image’? Where, or when, is it located? Is it material or immaterial? Does it belong to the world, or is it, with Jean Luc Nancy, distinct from it, or, to phrase it in more Deleuzian (or Bergsonian) terms, not of the world, but a refraction: a slice of world, a flowing matter, an *imaging*, with the brain as screen? If so, can we still speak of images in relation to computer vision, in the same way we speak of images in relation to human vision? And what consequences does this line of reasoning have for our thinking of the image as uncertain, or the uncertain-image: a slice of uncertainty that puts us in touch with the world’s uncertainty, as universal as it is—in the age of digital imaging—historically precise and specific?¹

I ask these questions, not because I have answers, nor, necessarily, because, as a film and media scholar, they concern me (as I think they should), but above all, because they help to situate my paper more clearly within the context of this special issue on the ‘uncertain

image.’ In other words, it is necessary to ask these questions to take position. Unlike most other contributions to this issue, my paper is less concerned with the questions and uncertainties invoked by the mass circulation and capturing of images in digital data aggregates (even if I touch on these issues in passing), and more with the image as it is humanly perceived in the face of the rapid proliferation of digital imaging and connective media technologies. The advent of the digital, I argue, gives rise to a number of uncertainties that manifest themselves in various kinds of uncertain-images, of which I will here address the following three: the image of digital labour, the image of human’s relation to (digital) images, and finally, the image of (im)possible escape, i.e. that of disconnectivity or withdrawal.

I will address these issues by perusing a specific *cinematic* example of an uncertain-image, i.e. that of the film *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015). My interest in this film lies not, or at least not per se, or not solely, in its representationalism, but rather in its *capturing* of these various kinds of uncertainty, to which I will here attend by situating the film against the backdrop of the aforementioned three different, yet interrelated, problematics related to the ubiquitous presence of digital imaging technologies: i.e., first, the concerns over digital or immaterial labour and the loss of eros (arguably implicit in the notion of creative control itself); second, the use of contemporary cinematics (and the superimposition effect in particular) to address these and other issues related to living in ‘information-intensive mixed-reality environments;’ and third, the film’s own suggestive counter-image, which is that of the characters’ partly defection, and, arguably, that of the image’s own withdrawal from the world.² The film lends itself to this purpose, I argue, because it attends to the aesthetics and problematics specific to living in ubiquitous media environments from the point of view of a medium that is, at once, older and ‘slower’ and yet ominously affected

by, and affecting, today's digital imaging technologies, from which it nonetheless significantly differs.

Part one speaks to the film's thematic address of the uncertainties brought about by the advent of the digital, which I will 'read' alongside Franco 'Bifo' Berardi book *The Soul at Work* (2009), in which a similar uncertain-image is presented. This part, in other words, deals with the image *of* uncertainty. But an image, I have argued elsewhere (2014), is always more than a representation *of* something: it partakes in whatever it seeks to represent. In the second part, therefore, I shift my attention to how this image itself is engaged in the production of uncertainties. Part two, in other words, deals with the image *as* uncertainty. Finally, in part three, I will attend to the film's own consideration of an alternative to these uncertainties, which itself is, again, an uncertain-image, i.e. the image of withdrawal. Part three, in other words, deals with both the image *of* withdrawal and the image *as* withdrawal, drawing Jean Luc Nancy's theory of the image as itself withdrawn, distinct from the world. Significantly, Nancy's theory prompts us to consider uncertainty as one of the key characteristics of the image *as humanly perceived*, and it is here, I argue, that the importance of distinguishing—indeed: discriminating—between the different questions and notions of 'uncertainty' and 'the image' that this special issue's theme speaks to becomes manifest.

Creative Control and the loss of eros: capturing *The Soul at Work*

Creative Control tells the story of David (Benjamin Dickinson), a thirty something overworked pill-popping advertising executive, who is put in charge of pitching the marketing campaign for a new technology called Augmenta—a cutting-edge wearable user interface that much looks like a pair of prescription eyeglasses, but in nonetheless envisioned as a high-tech combination of Google Glass, Oculus Rift, your

average smartphone, *Minority Report's* gestural interface, and *Iron Man's* Jarvis; that is, as a technologically advanced always-on semi-sentient companion capable of capturing the worlds image and manipulating it at the wearer's will.³ David pines for the breakthrough that the Augmenta campaign might offer him, now that, he states, he is finally given some level of creative control—a control, incidentally, that he is structurally denied in the pharma-commercials he is usually handed, here exemplified by the campaign for a smokable anti-panic drug called Phalinx. As the Augmenta pitch unfolds in the opening sequence (see Figure 1), we are introduced to the other characters of the film: Scott, David's charismatic boss, played by real-life co-founder of Vice magazine Gavin McInnes to typifies the NY technology innovation scene; Wim (Dan Gill), David's best friend, a Williamsburg hipster-schmuck fashion photographer who likes to send David instant messages of his latest sexual conquests, preferably in action; Wim's mesmerizing girlfriend Sophie (Alexia Rasmussen), an out-of-work fashion designer for whom David fixes a gig at the Phalinx campaign; and last but not least David's somewhat estranged girlfriend, Juliet (Nora Zehetner), a yoga teacher in the midst of an existential crisis of her own, we soon learn, with whom David's plotline is forcefully contrasted.

David nails the Augmenta campaign in a seemingly simple act of persuasion: after first underselling the technology to its developers and then overselling what a good marketing campaign can do for it, he convinces the client to land them the assignment based on a simple but all too recognizable premise: hand a pair of glasses to someone who is really creative (a 'creative level genius' here played by Brooklynite Reggie Watts as an exaggerated version of himself) and 'see what comes back.' No sooner has he closed the deal, then David finds himself leaning over a toilet, vomiting at the sound of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21. As the music continues, the image cuts to Juliet, who we



Figure 1. Opening scene of *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015): the Augmenta launch. A Magnolia Pictures release. Film still courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

find in one-legged pigeon pose when a ‘ding’ thuds from the transparent phone lying next to her. The words NEW MESSAGE appear in mid-air, extra-dietetically transposed onto the otherwise diffused and soft-focused image, and then again [DAVID | we got it;P] as she pick up the phone, looks at it, and smiles (Figure 2).

Thus, it comes as no surprise that, when David is handed a pair of Augmenta glasses upon his return to the open white office space, crowded with co-workers, flexible terminals, and translucent tables and screens, he cannot withstand their gravitational pull, despite his initial aversion. Assigned with the task of

reporting on its specs, he walks out, lights a cigarette, puts on the spectacles, types in his name—by making miniscule movements with his fingers in the air while intensely staring into space (Hi, David the OS replies, though how he hears it, beats me)—and bumps into Sophie on the streets, as he flips through some of the OS’s basic features (apps like health, mail, instant messaging, photo library, and so on). Significantly, it is the ensuing conversation that prompts the gadget to launch some of its more advanced features, as it starts to capture Sophie’s image and voice, scans her bodily features, and, in a matter of seconds, profiles her

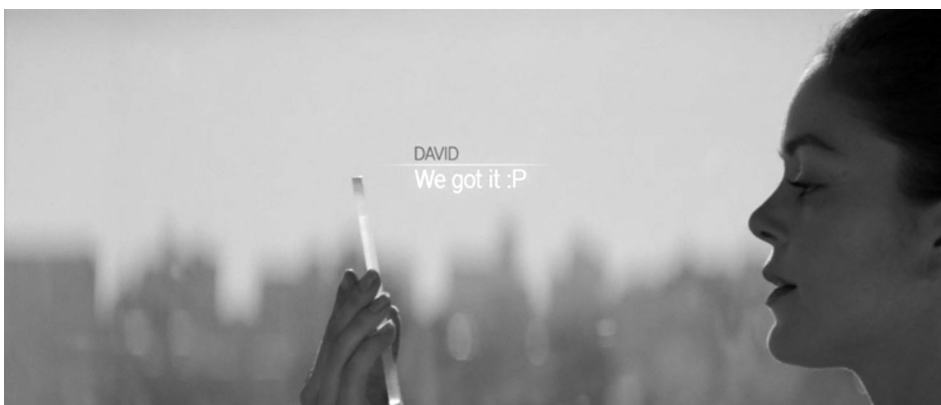


Figure 2. Juliet (Nora Zehetner) in *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015), a Magnolia Pictures release. Film still courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.



Figure 3. Sophie (Alexia Rasmussen) in *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015), a Magnolia Pictures release. Film still courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

using face and voice recognition software, providing David with every bit of information relevant to Sophie available on the net. (Figure 3) Triggered by this event, David is soon deluded into believing that he has fallen in love with her, or rather, with the life-like avatar he creates of her using Augmenta in his spare time, with whom he starts an affair after a massive fallout with his girlfriend over Coltan—short for columbite-tantalite, the raw material from which tantalum is extracted that is used, amongst others, in the production of mobile devices (including Augmenta, his girlfriend crossly asserts after reading a rather upsetting article on the topic of its uncontrolled mining in the *NY Times* of which, she asks: ‘Doesn’t that bother you?’ to which David replies: ‘And what are you going to do about it’ and ‘you fucking hypocrite?’)

Creative Control, in many ways, can be seen as an extended commentary on the outcomes of a transformation that took place in the experience of work and work relations from the late 1970s onwards, when, in the words of Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, the logic of social antagonism and need that characterized the workers’ movement in the 1960s and 1970s started to make way for a logic of desire. In *The Soul at Work* (2009) Berardi provocatively describes this transition as the moment in which the soul and its

desire enter the production process, where soul is understood not as spirit but in a materialistic way, as ‘the vital breath that converts biological matter into an animate body,’ or, with Spinoza, as ‘what the body can do’ (2009, 21). For Berardi, the progressive mentalization of the working process is the direct result of what transpired in the aftermath of the antagonistic social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (especially across Europe), characterized as they were by their intensified refusal to work. It is this refusal to work, which Berardi describes as a ‘materialization of desire’ invested beyond the waged labour relation, that today has been ‘put to work,’ and thus has become part and parcel of the work relation, a process that is intimately tied up with, and enabled by the ‘systemic computerization of the working process’—which, we know, has opened up entirely new perspectives for labour. Today, Berardi explains:

The content of labour becomes mental, while at the same time the limits of production become uncertain. The notion of productivity itself becomes undefined as the relation between the investment of time and bodily energy and the quantity of produced value have become more or less disentangled. (75)

Unlike in industrial labour, then, mental activity no longer figures as the abstract, general force of

labour (as in classical Marxism), but now has become personalized. As Jason Smith puts it in the introduction to Berardi's book, it is 'the particularity, the unique combination of psychic, cognitive and affective powers that I bring to the labour process' that is at stake (13–14).

Significantly, Berardi attributes the ensuing 'new love for working' that coincides with the capture of work-as-desire inside the network, at once to the precarization of labour under the conditions of neoliberalism and our increasingly media saturated culture (a combination he refers to as Semiocapitalism), as well as to a more general 'impoverishment of existence and communication' that he ties, first, to the gradual loss of our sense of community in the experience of everyday life, and second, to the loss of eros in our experience of communication with others due to the commodification of sexuality, now no longer an 'anxious need for identity' but rather a 'singular pleasure of the body' (79). It is precisely these two issues, I argue, around which the film *Creative Control* is thematically structured.

Set against the backdrop of the creative scene in New York, the film presents us with the prototypical new kind of worker, the high functional Millennials David, Scott, Wim, Reggie, Sophie, and even Juliet and Govindas (the yoga teacher played by real-life instructor Paul Manza, with whom Juliet starts an affair). Work lies at the core of their identity, specific, and personalized, vital to their constitution of self. Their 'always on' attitude fully concurs with the collapse of their times of leisure and labour, as well as with their use of the communicative devices that bind both them and the film's narrative together. Each one of them aspires some sort of breakthrough, and everyone is competitive in their struggle for survival: Scott and David in advertising, Juliet and Govindas in their Yoga practice, Wim and Sophie in fashion, Reggie in Art. Also, all of them are associated with some sort of disconnect: Sophie is 'not good with money' and

doesn't like to cohabitate, Juliet seeks to live her life mindfully, Reggie disappears off the grid, Scott finds himself confronted with death, and David tries to unwind from work by excessive abuse of pills, alcohol, joints, cocaine, and eventually also Phallinex, and by playing home with his entertainment gadget; Wim just likes to party ('You are right! I do live in a movie! And it's great!'). Unmediated social contacts and communication turn out to be frustrating and arduous and each one of them seems to have invested their libidinal energy into work: Scott in his exercise of power, Reggie in his ball-juggling video's (literally), David in the time he spends with Sophie's avatar, Juliet in her quest for (narcissistic) intimacy, Sophie in her flirtatious openness to the ones who could provide her with a job, Wim in his scopophilia and playing around, and Govindas in doing justice to his reputation of sleeping with all of his students (who, we do well to remember, are the ones who provide him with a living).

The issue of money is repeatedly brought up in the film: it is in the little gesture David makes when he sends Juliet off to her yoga retreat up North and hands her some cash money; it is in Sophie's remark that expresses her need for survival; it is in Scott's pep-talk when he tells David 'Big client, big money, ok? I need that report by tonight'; it also lies at the heart of David's fight with Juliet where he suggests that, unlike her, he cannot afford to quit his stressful job because he cannot fall back on his parents. In the midst of all this, Augmenta is explicitly presented as the red-herring Lauren Berlant speaks of in her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), that is, as the potential career breakthrough worthy of David's libidinal investment, especially after working hours, which at once holds the promise to his success and the threat (and reality) of his impending failure. It is a 'productive' failure, however, much unlike the one described by Jack Halberstam in her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, in the sense that it is fully instrumental: what leads David to his nervous breakdown and

gets him fired turns out to be the potential key to his ‘success’ that draws him straight back into the merry-go-around of Semiocapitalism, and into a job of which Juliet in astonished disbelief states, ‘but you are always unhappy!’.

Creative Control and *The Soul at Work* thus both offer us an image, a slice of life if you will, of the newfound yet profound uncertainty related to the infinite flexibilization of labour and the mass digitization of work and communication that has started to affect, not only the conditions of labour, but also those of human relations and arguably also those of existence itself. Significantly, both the film and Berardi’s book take Antonioni’s cinema as a point of reference in their attempts to seize the sense of relational discomfort characteristic of today’s post-industrial social scene. Indeed, many reviewers have commented on the film’s ‘stylized look’ of the film (Bishop 2016), its ‘lustrous, anamorphic black-and-white cinematography’ (Ehrlich 2016); its ‘gorgeous, crisp widescreen’ imagery (Roepert 2017) and its ‘wonderfully executed visual effects’ (Bishop 2016), which are curiously linked to both ‘classic Hollywood movies’ (Derakhshani 2016) and Antonioni’s art house cinema (Lewis 2016). At once deemed modern and classic, retrograde, and ‘more advanced,’ the imagery is further hailed for its relatively slow, ‘meandering pace,’ at once ‘mesmerizing’ and ‘snazzy,’ and ‘art directed to a fault’ (Kohn 2015). And while we may agree with one reviewer who reckons the comparison to Antonioni’s work incited by the film’s press release as ‘a bit too generous,’ the reference is nonetheless remarkably astute when we consider how *Creative Control* transposes some of the key characteristics of Antonioni’s aesthetics to the present-day situation of communication overload. Berardi sums up these characteristics as follows: the sense of social alienation and ‘incommunicability’; a quality of experience in which the immediacy of human relations is lost; the related more general condition of malaise that inhabits not only our social relations, but also,

most notably, our relation with the self; and lastly, ‘the flattening of nuance and the industrial homologation of different aspects of existence’ (Berardi 106–110). In Antonioni’s cinema, we know, these concerns are intricately intertwined with his aesthetics: the often lengthy shots of dehumanized empty (industrial) landscapes; the suspension of character development and motivated action; the films’ ‘open, decentered, elliptical narrative structures that remove the drama from the plot’; the open-endedness and ambiguity with which these ‘surfaces of the world’ are presented; and finally, their fluctuation between reality and imagination, fantasy and memory, the virtual and the actual, which in Deleuzian parlance, leads to ‘crystal images’ of time. (Winter 2014, 239–241)

Yet in transposing Antonioni’s aesthetics from the site of industrial capitalism to the post-industrial landscape something crucial becomes clear about the nature of our emerging uneasiness today, within the post-industrial landscape of Semiocapitalism, here captured in the world of advertising, where the assembly line has been replaced by digital assemblages that link people through symbols. Here, Berardi writes, and it is worth to quote him at some length here:

Productive life is overloaded with symbols that not only have an operational value, but also an affective, emotional, imperative or dissuasive one. The signs cannot work without unleashing chains of interpretation, decoding, and conscious responses. The constant mobilization of attention is essential to the productive function: the energies stages by the productive system are essentially creative, affective and communicational. Each producer of semiotic flows is also a consumer of them, and each user is part of the productive process: all exits are also an entry, and every receiver also a transmitter. (Berardi 2009, 107)

Unlike in Antonioni’s cinema, then, in the slice of life that *Creative Control* offers, images are not slow paced, nor, however, and this is important, are they necessarily fast; indeed, as one reviewer remarks, there are ‘no music-video-

style jump cuts here’ (Derakhshani 2016). Instead, rhythms alternate: slo-mo bits of driving cars oscillate with stroboscopic club scenes and the speed of congested screens; static living room and office scenes are juxtaposed to the slow-paced yoga/meditation sessions, as well as to the camera’s meandering on and off the street. Notably, the marked differences in pace are as often the result of the editing style and shot duration as they are triggered by the accumulation of visual stimuli (or lack thereof) within the image itself. As Smith remarks,

It is not simply the phenomenon of speed *as such* that plays the pathogenic role here. The social factory is just as much governed by the destabilizing experience of changes in rhythms, *differences in speeds*, whiplash-like reorientations imposed on a workforce that is flexible, precarious, and permanently on-call—and equipped with the latest iPhone. (Smith in Berardi 2009, 11)

And what better medium to comment on the hold these different speeds have over us in the age of Semiocapitalism than contemporary cinematics—if not a time-image in the classical modernist sense of the word (Deleuze 1989), then at least an image of what time has become under the conditions of mass digitization, i.e. an ocean of data.

Superimposition, datafication, and the uncertain-image

In one of the most captivating scenes of the film, we see David at the office, in a deluge of an incoming video-call, popping-up screens and instant messages in an act of progressive multitasking, as we observe him gradually lose (creative) control over just about every aspect of his life. Sitting at one of the long conference tables in the markedly open office space, he connects Augmenta to the translucent keyboard, black pen, and white puck in front of him, unlocks the AR app and starts to ‘work’ on Sophie’s avatar during office hours. Using both fingers, pointer devices and keystrokes he plugs some

of the newly captured material of Sophie into the app, synchs her voice, and refines ‘her’ gestural movements. As the scene progresses, all of the film’s storylines start to come together in an excessive amount of incoming calls, ‘bing’-ing messages, and popping-up screens with tasks and targets, codes and video-edits that all demand both David’s, and our, instant attention. (see Figure 4)

In a seemingly aimless video-call Reggie presents him with some of his more radical ideas for Augmenta; Scott gives him an ultimatum on the Phalinex edit; Hollis (his co-worker on the edit) tells him that Scott will get him fired if he doesn’t deliver; Juliette is clearly upset and losing it; Wim reminds him of an earlier made appointment (what appointment?); Scott gives him another warning; so do Wim, Hollis, Juliet, and so on. As David works his way through the incoming information, his eyes dart in every direction (as do ours), his face making minuscule gestural movements that mimic his inner turmoil, as he inattentively utters ‘uhuh’ ... ‘ok’ ... ‘uhuh’ ‘that’s great Reggie’, at once responsive and numbed, focused and distracted, moving back and forth between the call, the messages, Sophie’s avatar, and the Phalinex edit (which, incidentally, he has plugged into the AR app to round up), until, finally, Juliet asks him if he is seeing someone, to which David ironically replies ‘you are imagining things.’ But by this time, we have probably long lost our focus, as it is quite impossible to multitask our way through all the necessary information to keep up with the film’s narrative unfolding, which has become peripheral to what one reviewer calls ‘the virtual detritus’ consuming David’s and arguably also our minds. (Kohn 2015) Acutely aware of all that we might have missed, we are thus confronted with the disturbing effect this violent appeal to the senses has on us, in part by way of a close-up of David’s transpiring face (the affection-image par excellence), even if it is not *his* perspective we are invited to adopt, but rather that of the HCI in which we are

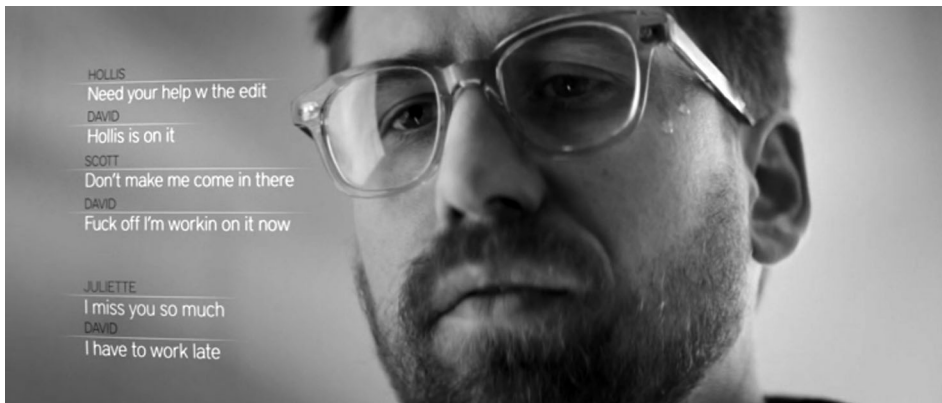


Figure 4. David (Benjamin Dickinson) in *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015), a Magnolia Pictures release. Film still courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

invited to project ourselves (I will return to this issue below).

However important, it is not so much the scene's interpolation of story events that holds my attention here, as it is its *imaging* of what triggers David's gradual collapse, or, if you will, the gradual collapse of David, the viewer, society at large, of the narrative, or arguably even, of narrative as such. Sounds, images, texts, codes, data, graphics, and snippets of captured attention swirl through the air, bit-sized, ongoing, and personalized. While not quite extra-diegetic, most of it is clearly superimposed—floating in mid-air in the open office space, internally focalized (whether directly or indirectly), subject to both David's and our own unsettling and unsettled glare. The perspective changes multiple times, cutting back and forth between, first, a low angle medium shot of David sitting at the table while activating (and later deactivating) the system; second, a point of view shot from David's spectacles looking up, looking down, shuffling the virtual windows around in the air, prioritizing, responding, ignoring, toying, coding, editing, and responding some more; and finally, another low angle shot, this time in close-up, of David's face in distracted concentration, immersed in the info-glut as he breaks out in a panic and sweat. The scene ends with three more or less

simultaneous interruptions: first, that of the soundtrack when Reggie 'hangs up'; second, that of David's procrastination and fantasy upon Juliet's question; and third, that of the glutted image, when David switches off the AR visor, hangs his head in de-pression, and lets out an exhausted sigh. Cut to Juliet, sitting in her over-lit bedroom in silence, hair uncombed, in an equally apathic fit of nervous breakdown.

What strikes me as peculiar about this scene, is that the image effect that is chosen to comment on our increased reliance on, and struggle with, technologically mediated forms of connectivity, is the very effect that in early cinema was predominantly used to conjure up apparitions of ghosts and the fantastic. Unlike in the 1990s and 2000s, however, when the superimposition effect was widely used in science fiction to construe a sense of rhetorical objectivity of data technologies in cinema, and to articulate the promise of intelligibility or mastery (if only for the few), the effect is used here, first and foremost, to probe a sense of entrapment, estrangement, overstraining, and fatigue associated with the ubiquitous presence of connective media devices in our everyday lives and environments that are biased towards constant availability. What emerges then, one could argue, is a cinematic image of uncertainty, or

an uncertain-image, in which the contemporary logics of networked connectivity, mass digitization, and datafication are at once negated, and made manifest.

Technically speaking, however, what we are dealing with here is not the technique of superimposition in the early cinema sense of the word, where the term is commonly used to refer to the process of double exposure that results in the overlaying of two (or more) discrete images in one, which can be either achieved as an in-camera effect or through lab-work (and even then, of these two, only the first is formally called superimposition).⁴ The ‘erroneous’ use of the term in this context is instructive, however, as it calls attention to the fact that this image is not analogously but digitally produced. We cannot speak of double exposure here, because there are no analogue, spatially indexed, celluloid images to begin with. Indeed, something crucial appears to be lost in the many allusions to classical (art house) cinema used to describe this image that in my view crucial is to its uncertainty, which is the fact that the film is shot on an *ALEXA Studio*: a 35 mm format film-style *digital* camera with anamorphic Hawk Scope lenses.

Just like *Creative Control*’s pace is not slow but unstable, then, its image, unlike that of Antonioni’s, is not empty but full; in fact, it is bewilderingly full. The image is full, not only for what it depicts, but more specifically, because of what art historian Julian Stallabrass, in a different context, refers to as the ‘manifest display of very large amounts of data’ *within* the image itself (Stallabrass 2007, 82). Writing about the high-res photography of Rieneke Dijkstra and others in the 1990s, Stallabrass uses the term ‘the data sublime’⁵ to refer to the ‘chaotically complex and immensely large configuration of data’ within images that the viewer cannot make sense of. It is this quality of the image, I suspect, rather than its many overt cinematic allusions, that prompt reviewers to use adjectives like ‘clean,’ ‘crisp,’ ‘snazzy,’ or ‘gorgeous’ to describe it. The virtual this image

confronts us with, then, and makes tangible to our bodies, is that of the infinite possibilities of what the image could (have) become; that is, its radical manipulability, its profound uncertainty. For indeed, what goes for the swirling images around David’s head, also goes for those swirling around ours: they are constitutive of what David Rodowick calls a ‘digital event’ (2007, 163–173), i.e. they are comprised of various data sets that are layered on top of one another and transformed into one coordinate image by way of a complex process of digital imaging.⁶ Uncertainty, here, takes place on multiple levels besides our eventual (human) perception of it: first, on that of the various discrete data sets (or ‘images’); second, on that of the spatio-temporal and material differentiations between them; and, third, on that of digital imaging itself, i.e. the processing, compression, storage, and display required for this image to ‘emerge.’ It is the tension between these different modalities of the image—both datafied and phenomenological, with the cinematic operating as the in-between—that holds my interest as a cinema/ media scholar. Significantly, Significantly, Berardi equally speaks of the ‘the infinite vastness of the Infosphere’ in terms of the sublime, which he in turn links to the rocketing of the panic depressive syndrome since the late-1990s after the advent of the digital. Tracing the etymology of the word panic back to the Greek word *pan-*, meaning ‘all’ or ‘everything,’ and to the Greek god Pan (associated with nature, erotics, and the sublime), Berardi suggests that panic occurs when ‘we feel overwhelmed, unable to receive in our consciousness the infinite stimulus that the world produces in us’ (100), which, he argues, is typically the result of an ‘over-exploitation of available mental energy,’ and the saturation of our attention to the point of collapse. (98)

The scene of David’s impending crisis is so forceful, I argue, not only because it captures the post-industrial landscape of Semicapitalism so very well, but also, and more importantly perhaps, because it affectively engages us in its

uncertain-image, constituting what I have elsewhere called a cinematic encounter that is at once affective and traumatic perforce (2014). It does so by allowing the viewer just enough space for identification, not so much with its protagonist, but rather with the situation he is in, or more specifically, with the human–computer interface he has become part of, and in which we are invited to partake as well. Equipped with the AR visor, David’s worldview, much like our own, is a highly mediated and ambivalent one; a mixed reality, on the one hand a ‘world of humanist perspective,’ on the other, a construal of ‘numerical data and diagrammatic simulations’ (Cubitt 2017). This, Sean Cubitt’s writes in his brilliantly insightful analysis of the use of the AR visor in *Iron Man 2*, is the ‘contemporary cyborg’—no longer ‘a human with bionic implants but a massive array of networked computing power with implanted humans’ (Cubitt 2017). The use of the superimposition effect in *Creative Control*, with its invocation of a sense of hauntedness (i.e. of being haunted by what is projected), and its phantasmagoric provocation of the senses⁷ (i.e. the fact that it engulfs all of the viewer’s senses, and at the same time calls them into question), moreover, is instructive, I argue, as it at once works to obscure and confront us with this image’s own machinic logic, by way of which it transforms human agency from its effective cause (i.e. the one who watches/works) to its material effect (the image, the data, the commodity fetish if you will). It does so, in a profoundly contemporary act of cinematic labour, whereby every bit of *our* invested attention is captured by Amazon Studios, the company that holds the distribution rights to this film.

Like the workers in Freder’s Moloch hallucination, who mindlessly walk into the machine’s mouth in *Metropolis* (1927; Frits Lang’s seminal critique of conveyer-belt industrial capitalism), here, we can be said to feed and lubricate the machine of Semicapitalism.⁸ Yet unlike *Metropolis*’ imaginary viewer, Freder, here, the viewer

is no longer envisioned at a safe distance, agonizing over the machine’s disastrous effects. Rather, we are portrayed as part and parcel of the machine at work. Illustrative, here, is the image in which we see David at home, alone in the dark, toying with his entertainment gadget (see Figure 5). He faces the camera directly, but rather than disrupting the continuity of the film’s narrative (as it usually would), his direct address is ‘interrupted’ by the Augmenta interface, which is here projected (‘superimposed’) in reverse. And yet, he looks straight at the camera, thus, straight at us, at once disallowing the viewer into the story world (by way of identification), while at the same time disrupting the classical distinction between story world and the world in which the viewer resides. As a consequence, we are included in this ‘slice of life,’ envisioned *inside* the machine just like David, an extension of it, at once looking and looked at, intricately intertwined with *this* image in the same way as David is with his: part of a network, a machinic assemblage in which both images, viewers, and their capturing technologies partake.

Afterthought: the image of withdrawal | the withdrawal of the image

What, then, to make of the counter-image the film presents to this contemporary incarnation of the perhaps all too recognizable good-old classical male paranoiac’s tale of technophobia, which is the image of Juliet (and arguably also David and the other character’s) partly defection or withdrawal. Meet David’s better half, Juliet, his mirror image. A part-time yoga instructor on a path of self-discovery through the spiritual possibilities of yoga and mindfulness, Juliet is unwilling (and perhaps unable) to live out ‘the good life’ fantasy the way David does, but to which she is nonetheless bound by way of her conceited dependence on him, both financially and emotionally. She aspires a life ‘upstate,’ withdrawn from the



Figure 5. Direct address in *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015), a Magnolia Pictures release. Film still courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

networks of mass connectivity, far away from labour exploitation and workplace pressure. She experiences ‘union’ with Govindas, her (rival) yoga instructor (whose name is said to mean ‘the servant of love’)—a true cosmic oneness that makes her realize that ‘we are all connected,’ which, however, like everything else in the film, turns out to be nothing more than a fulfilment of her own narcissistic desire.

It is all set-up very symmetrically, the images neatly intercut. Where David’s world is depicted in high-contrast black-and-white imagery, hers is presented in a soft-focus haze. His world exasperatingly hectic | hers, by contrast, soothingly slow. His retreat into the office loo to puke | her flight onto her yoga mat. His success | her smile. His nightlife drug and alcohol abuse | her yoga retreat. Her agony at the dinner table | his anger. Her lack of responsiveness at his coarse sexual advances | his refusal to intimacy. His collapse | her nervous breakdown. His adventure with Sophie’s avatar | her narcissistic intimacy with Govindas. His pink slip | her enlightenment. Where Juliet’s path of self-realization makes David’s life look unhealthy and perverted, his level-headed rationality make her worldview appear as hallucinatory and naïve. The images, in other words, are fully in service of one another. Juliet’s meditative withdrawal does not serve to counter-act

that of David’s hyper-connected life and the dynamics of capitalism at all, but in fact functions, to speak with Slavoj Žižek, as its ‘perfect ideological supplement.’⁹ Juliet inside their home | David lured back outside by his own ambition—facing one another through the transparent glass of their high-rise’s window frame (Figure 6). The division of labour could not have been more gendered.¹⁰

The only character who is attributed a relative autonomy within this dynamic, indeed, is real-life Sophie. She’s not good with money, refuses to be provided for, considers cohabitation ‘a grown-up problem’ and walks out of Wim, David, the film and its viewer with a retracted ‘fuck you both’ after David confesses his love to her, reveals Wim’s deceit, and gets beaten up on the spot, Wim’s camera ever prepared. Significantly, however, and the relevance of Sophie’s *gesture* of withdrawal notwithstanding,¹¹ her withdrawal takes place only after she has first, and more than anyone else in the film, been fully captured by the scopophilic gaze of the male vision machine: she’s subject to Wim’s instant messaging and the focus of David’s augmented gaze, and will become the spokesperson for Augmenta, thus suggesting that her ‘labour’ is no longer needed for her to live on and reproduce herself within the coming (inhuman) machine.



Figure 6. Face to face in *Creative Control* (Dickinson 2015), a Magnolia Pictures release. Film still courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

The film's ironic commentary on the impossibility of 'opting out,' and the tension between connecting and disconnecting, and in other words, fully subscribes to the paradox of disconnectivity itself, whereby the possibility to opting-out is already fully enfolded within, and thus subscribing to, the logic of our present-day 'culture of connectivity.'¹² There simply seems no escape ...

The film's own disturbing conclusions about the totalizing logic of connective media technologies and 'the purgatory of solipsism' (Edelstein 2016) it breads notwithstanding, however, there is one thing that arguably escapes it, which is the uncertain-image as Image itself. By way of afterthought, therefore, I would like to end this article with Jean Luc Nancy's understanding of 'the image' as 'the distinct,' as *itself* withdrawn from the world. The image, Nancy writes, is always sacred: it is an energy or intensity that distinguishes itself from the world of availability 'like the sky from the ground.' Nancy makes a point of distinguishing his use of the word sacred from that of religion. Where the latter implies a bond, he argues, the sacred signifies that which is cut off, set apart from the rest.¹³ The image is sacred, for Nancy, because it 'crosses the distance of [its] withdrawal even while maintaining it though its mark as an image.' (2005, 2) He writes:

What is withdrawn from this world has no use, or has a completely different use, and is not presented in a manifestation (a force is precisely not a form: here it is also a question of grasping how the image is not a form and is not formal). (2)

The image distinguishes itself from the world of availability, in other worlds, by its lack of continuity. It leaves the distinction between image and world intact, while also reaching out, touching. Nancy:

Continuity takes place only within the indistinct, homogeneous space of things and of the operations that bind them together. The distinct, on the contrary, is always the heterogeneous, that is, the unbound—the unbindable. (3)

It is in this intimacy, this uncertainty, 'simultaneously threatening and captivating from out of the distance into which it withdraws,' I argue, that *Creative Control's* uncertain-image has the potential to touch us, as human beings, therewith arguably disrupting the coming (inhuman) machine. Significantly, Nancy maintains that the image is not only visual. It can also be musical, he writes, or poetic, it can appeal to any of the senses. It can perhaps even be computer generated, digitized. However, for the image to reach us 'in the midst of intimacy,' Nancy reasoning suggests, it *must* cross that distance (while also maintaining it); for it to be an

image, in other words, it must be humanly perceived. This raises one final, but in my view critical question with regards to the image's uncertainty in the age of mass digitization, which is the question if (and if so) we can (or indeed should) use the word 'image' in the context of computer vision at all.

Notes

1. I thank Frederik Tygstrup, Sarah Kember, Ulrik Ekman, the people of the Uncertain Archive consortium in Copenhagen, those involved in the Uncertain Image Seminar, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal, for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. This paper is part of a larger project on disconnectivity in the digital age, in which I reflect on the public discussions on digital labor, the rapid proliferation of digital imaging and connective media technologies, and, last but not least, the desire, or even need, to disconnect. While these topics are each deserving of a paper or book length discussion of their own (of which, luckily, there are many), my main concern, here, lies precisely in bringing them together, for it is only then, I argue, that the shared set of concerns around which they revolve becomes manifest. This approach is prompted, not in the least, by the film *Creative Control*, my case-study, which – as a theoretical object - prompts us, with some urgency, to consider the concerns over digital labor, digital imaging, and disconnectivity in relation to one another.
3. For the impatient reader with a penchant for plot: many brief plot descriptions can be found the web. I have refrained from including one here, for the simple reason that in my view many, if not all of them, fall short in capturing the film's contribution to the debates in which it situates itself so clearly. Perhaps best to spend two and a half minutes on the film's trailer, which can be found here: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3277624/videoplayer/vi1759556889?ref_=tt_ov_vi.
4. For a historical account of the technique of superimposition, and the critical reception of its life, death, and afterlife in for example avant-garde cinema see: Bazin (1997), Morgan (2011), Natale (2012).
5. I thank Daniela Agostinho for bringing this term to my attention.
6. For an receptive reflection on digital imaging, layering, and the making of space see Cubitt (2010).
7. The reference here is to Gunning (2009).
8. The intertitles of *Metropolis*: [Evil Maria: 'Wer schmiert die Maschinen-Gelenke mit, seinem eigenen Mark - ?!'] Trans: 'Who lubricates the machine joints with his own sweat - ?!']. For a full transcript see: <https://www.uow.edu.au/~morgan/Metron3.htm>.
9. (2014, 65) Although Žižek develops his argument more specifically in relation to 'Western Buddhism,' I think it is fair to argue that a similar tension is at play here, where the meditative path is at once presented and criticized as 'arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity.' (2014, 66)
10. For a thought-provoking reflection on the radical division of labor within the scholarly (no) exit debate, in which men are seen to withdrawal from and via work, and women by breaking away from the conventional bonds of intimacy and care, see Sarah Sharma's seminal lecture 'Do not Enter, This is Not an Exit: Sexodus and the Gig Economy' (2016). My observation on the division of labor in *Creative Control* is derived from there. For another provocative commentary on the gendering of the discourses on media and mediation see Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska's *Life After New Media* (2014) and Kember's *iMedia* (2015) featuring Janet (sic!) Smart.
11. There is, in fact, more to say about this, but space is limited; I briefly touch on the topic of *gesture* in Hesselberth (2017).
12. The reference is to Dijck (2013). On the paradox of dis/connectivity, see Hesselberth (2017).
13. Nancy thus invokes the more (but never quite entirely) secular meaning of the word sacred as 'too valuable to be interfered with' (OED).

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