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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

- Remembering the Cold War: Don DeLillo's Underworld and Lieux de
Mémoire 1
ROB SHEPHERD
- Encountering Unruly Bodies: Posthuman and Disabled Bodies in *Under
the Skin* 19
LIEKE HETTINGA
- How to Hang a Song on a Wall: Experiencing Björk's *Black Lake*
Installation 31
KYLE FAGEOL

REVIEWS

- The Dangers of Soft Power: A Review of the *The Aesthetics and Affects
of Cuteness* Conference 45
AMBER WITSENBURG

CREATIVE WRITING

- Two Poems 49
MARTHE VAN BRONKHORST
- Finale 51
ANGIE VAN EK

Remembering the Cold War: Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and Lieux de Mémoire

ROB SHEPHERD^{*1}

Abstract: This paper will investigate the way in which memories of the Cold War are explored in Don DeLillo's 1997 novel Underworld. While numerous critics have remarked on Underworld's engagement with the Cold War, few have situated this engagement within the wider field of collective memory studies. This paper thus looks at the way in which Underworld remediates collective memories of the Cold War era and suggests that DeLillo's novel can be seen as, what the French historian Pierre Nora refers to as, a lieu de mémoire (site of memory) for the United States collective experience of the Cold War. The essay will begin by examining the problematic way in which the Cold War has tended to be discussed in relation to memory studies. From here, it will turn to a brief discussion of what exactly can be said to constitute a lieu de mémoire. The essay will then engage in a close reading of the 1951 Dodgers-Giants National League Final depicted in Underworld's prologue, "The Triumph of Death," arguing that the game functions as a multi-faceted lieu de mémoire to the United States experience of the Cold War.

Keywords: memory studies, Cold War, lieux de mémoire, Pierre Nora, Don DeLillo.

Remembering and contextualizing the Cold War

As a number of studies have noted, the Cold War remains problematic as far as the study of collective memory is concerned. This is arguably the case because the Cold War is chiefly defined by that which did not transpire, or, to put it another way, the conflict's failure to turn "hot." This is a point elaborated on by David Lowe and Tony Joel in *Remembering the*

* Rob Shepherd is a recent graduate of the research master's program Literary Studies at VU University Amsterdam.

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Cold War: Global Contest and National Stories (2013) who note that, "the absence of apocalyptic conflict presents something of an anomaly when it comes to remembering a "war" that, in essence, failed to ever materialize beyond more localized wars and acts of violence" (1). Given this understanding of the Cold War as a "non-event," many scholars have concluded that the conflict is unsuited to investigation as a site of collective memory, certainly from a "Western" perspective. Such a position is exemplified by Jan-Werner Müller, who notes in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (2002), that "unlike 'hot wars,' the Cold War does not lend itself to memorialisation and, at least in the West, to the tales of suffering and mourning which are familiar from the world wars" (3).

However, the presumption that the Cold War is an unproductive site for an investigation into collective memory ignores the fact that the "conflict" was experienced in a heterogeneous manner. Therefore, while Western Europe may have experienced the Cold War as a largely "bloodless" conflict, the same cannot be said for the United States, which saw large numbers of casualties through its protracted involvement in Vietnam. Indeed, as Heonik Kwon argues in *The Other Cold War* (2010), while the Cold War may have been a largely peaceful if anxious time for Europe, "The U.S. experience of the cold war does not collapse to the paradigm of the 'imaginary war' or the 'long peace' as easily as does the dominant European experience. Indeed, the United States has a memory of mass sacrifice of American lives from the era of the cold war mainly in relation to the Korean and Vietnam conflicts" (149). Consequently, Kwon suggests that "the American memory distinguishes the United States from the rest of the west" (149) because its experience of the event is not that of "a painful but largely deathless confrontation between political communities" (149). However, while Kwon may argue that the American experience of the Cold War is characterised by a loss of life unknown in Europe, it is nevertheless the case that, despite this, there has been strikingly little official commemoration or memorialisation of the United States' experience of the period.²

² The lack of memorialisation accorded the Cold War in the United States is examined by John Wiener in *How We Forgot the Cold War: A Historical Journey across America* (2012). Wiener underlines how monuments to the Cold War have tended to be the pet projects of right wing groups and individuals. Most of these projects have been highly partisan and ideologically charged, and in most cases failures. Where monuments to the Cold War have been built, Wiener argues, more often than not, the original focus of remembrance has had to be shifted or modified: "Despite the immense effort by conservatives to shape

The lack of official memorialisation afforded the Cold War within the United States seems to suggest that, once again, the Cold War is an unilluminating area for an investigation into collective cultural memory. However, I would argue that remembrance of the United States' experience of the period is evoked in the cultural landscape via films, TV programs, novels, and art.³ The importance of art and culture as repositories of cultural memory is a key tenet of culture memory studies and is succinctly summarised by Astrid Erll in "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory" (2008). Erll notes that "Cultural memory is based on communication through media" (396) and that "On a collective level, fictional texts and movies can become powerful media, whose versions of the past circulate in large parts of society and even internationally" (396). I would contend that Don DeLillo's 1997 novel *Underworld* is an exemplar of the way in which Erll argues fictions function as repositories of collective memory, and that the text specifically serves to evoke U.S. memories of the Cold War.

Beginning in 1951, *Underworld* presents a narrative that covers the early days of the Cold War to the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain in the early nineties. While numerous critics have remarked on *Underworld's* thematic engagement with the Cold War, few have situated this engagement within the wider field of collective memory studies. I therefore intend to conduct a close reading of the novel's prologue, "The Triumph of Death," focusing on the manner in which the 1951 Dodgers-Giants National League Final depicted therein can be said to constitute what the French historian, Pierre Nora, would call a lieu de mémoire, or site of memory, to the United States experience of the Cold War.

public memory of the Cold War, their monuments weren't built, their historical sites have had few visitors, and many of their museums have shifted focus to other topics" (2). Wiener argues that the "one exception to the pattern described here of popular indifference and scepticism" (297) is that accorded to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., a monument to the loss of life suffered by American troops in the Vietnam War. Wiener's argument can therefore be seen to implicitly enforce the idea that, lacking as it does mass loss of life (outside of specific regional conflicts) or an easily identifiable narrative of collective trauma, the Cold War is an unproductive site of collective memory.

³ A recent prominent example of this being the FX television series *The Americans*, which tells the story of two Soviet KGB officers posing as an American married couple living in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., in the early eighties.

Lieux de mémoire or sites of memory

Before outlining the manner in which the Dodgers-Giants game depicted in *Underworld* can be seen as a site of memory to the American experience of the Cold War, it is first important to outline precisely what constitutes a lieu de mémoire. Nora first introduced the idea of lieux de mémoire in the essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" (1989). Therein Nora uses the term to describe "sites" of memory which function as popular repositories for specific collective national memories and pasts. Astrid Erll elaborates on Nora's work in *Memory in Culture* (2011), explaining that lieux de mémoire need to be "understood as *loci* in the broadest sense of the term, which call up *imagines*, the memory images of the [...] nation" (23). In other words, lieux de mémoire are cultural objects which invoke memories of the past in specific (national) groups and communities.

As Michael Rothberg highlights in "Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux de Mémoire to Noeuds de Mémoire" (2010), the "sites" of memory Nora talks about "include not only monuments and museums, but also novels, cities, personages, symbols, and more" (3). Nora's lieux de mémoire function as substitutes for "actual" binding collective national memories (and the national identities predicated upon them) in an era when such concepts have become fractured due to the processes of modernity.⁴ Consequently, as Erll explains, while the examples of lieux de mémoire proffered by Nora may "stand for aspects of a common past, they do not, in their variety, amount to a binding comprehensive memory, but instead leave the reader with a fragmented image of the French past" (23). In this regard, lieux de mémoire are only able to illicit feelings of nostalgia in the contemporary observer, who occupies a world in which overarching notions of national identity and collective memory will always remain splintered, divergent, and pluralised.

Despite the foundational role played by the idea of the lieux de mémoire in cultural memory studies, as Rothberg notes, "critics have lodged a variety of complaints against both Nora's conceptualization of memory and the scope of the *Lieux de mémoire* volumes" (4). In "Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany" (2004), for example, Alexander Erkind critiques what he sees as the nationalist character of Nora's project. For Erkind, there are two kinds of cultural memory at play within any society. The first of these is "hard

⁴ As Nora himself notes, "There are Lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory" (7).

memory [which] consists primarily of monuments (and, sometimes, state laws and court decisions)" (39) and which "is usually the responsibility of the state" (56). The second kind of cultural memory is "*Soft memory* [which] consists primarily of texts (including literary, historical, and other narratives)" (39), and which is "the domain of society" (56). Erkind sees "hard" and "soft" memory as interdependent and argues that the "hard" memory embodied in "official" monuments ceases to signify anything meaningful unless subject to the "soft" memory bound up in "current intellectual and political discourse" (40). Furthermore, for Erkind, the "soft" memory of the social realm becomes ephemeral when not "anchored by monuments, memorials, and museums" (40). Erkind's critique of the concept of lieux de mémoire thus hinges on what he sees as Nora's fixation with the physical "monuments" of "hard" state-sponsored memory. Consequently, Erkind argues that Nora's work, and the idea of the lieux de mémoire more generally, are part of an ideological and nationalist project:

They represent the identity of the nation-state as a desired unity between the state, the people, and their common history. They produce "truth," imposing it upon citizens as well as observers. They work as materialized forms of patriotic sentiment: sites of historical memory, of course, but first and foremost, visible and touchable bodies of nationalism, which has always created the future by distorting the past. (Erkind 40)

However, Nora's project is not solely fixated on state-sponsored monuments of "hard" memory and is more nuanced and pluralistic than Erkind suggests. As Erll points out, throughout the course of Nora's work, he and his contributors posit "Popular phrases ('dying for the fatherland'), ways of thinking and arguing ('Gaullists and Communists'), and social manners ('gallantry')" (25) as well as novels and philosophical texts as lieux de mémoire. As Erll thus continues, lieux de mémoire can potentially be "any cultural phenomenon, whether material, social or mental, which a society associates with its past and with national identity" (25). Consequently, Erkind's suggestion that Nora is only interested in the monuments of "hard" memory and the role they play in bolstering a state-sponsored, pedagogically aligned national identity, seems a somewhat erroneous criticism, unsupported by the totality of Nora's work.

A more nuanced and useful critique of Nora's conception of lieux de mémoire is expressed by Hue-Tam Ho Tai in "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory" (2001). Therein, Ho Tai calls attention to the following problematic aspects of Nora's work:

The contests and conflicts that are so amply documented [...] are not about France per se but are about the nature of its national identity. The overall effect is, while there may be many perspectives on France (monarchic, republican, Catholic, among others) they have one object. This is a France that is indivisible even when understood differently over time and by different segments of the population. (910)

In other words, the problem Ho Tai locates in Nora's work is its inward-looking and nation-centric nature. For Ho Tai, lieux de mémoire, as they appear in Nora's work, are problematic because they can potentially fail to account for postcolonial, diasporic, trans-, and multicultural contexts and perspectives (even while they grapple with the multi-faceted nature of memory and national identity). Ho Tai's critique reminds us that it is important to bear in mind that, as Homi K. Bhabha explains in "DissemiNation" (1990), that there is always "cultural liminality – within the nation" (299), and that nations are inherently problematic constructs with borders that are always porous and permeable.

I will therefore depart from the position that, in essence, lieux de mémoire can potentially be said to be any cultural phenomenon, "hard" or "soft," which a group, community, or society (which might not necessarily be confined within the borders of a discreet nation-state) associates with its idea of itself, its collective identity, and its past. In the case of *Underworld*, I will suggest that the 1951 Dodgers-Giants game depicted in "The Triumph of Death" conforms to Nora's criteria for identifying a lieu de mémoire in a number of key ways, and that the concept proves to be particularly productive for looking at the way DeLillo's novel remediates a particular American collective memory of the Cold War (with all the problems such a nation-centred approach can potentially entail). It is, consequently, the precise manner in which the events depicted in "The Triumph of Death" exemplify key aspects of Nora's lieux de mémoire, to which I shall now turn.

Anticipated commemoration

Underworld's prologue, "The Triumph of Death", dramatizes the Dodgers-Giants 1951 National League Final in which Bobby Thomson hits "the Shot Heard Round the World" (DeLillo 95), winning the game for the Giants. The game is referred back to throughout the text, and the ball at the end of Thomson's bat becomes the focus of a quest for lost origins which interconnects the majority of the narrative threads that run through the novel.⁵ In addition to this, the game is also brought into dialogue with a number of other prominent post-war events, most obviously the successful detonation, on the same day, by the USSR of its second atomic bomb.⁶ In doing so, "The Triumph of Death" positions the Dodgers-Giants game as the locus for a wide-range of interpenetrating collective memories which serve to make the event into a textual lieu de mémoire within *Underworld* and, arguably, also within the broader post-war history of the United States.

The depiction of the Dodgers-Giants game found within "The Triumph of Death" conforms to Nora's idea of the lieu de mémoire in a number of key ways. Perhaps most obviously, the game is framed within *Underworld's* narrative as what Nora describes as "one of those nonevents that are immediately charged with heavy symbolic meaning and that, at the moment of their occurrence, seem like anticipated commemorations of themselves" (22). Such a designation, I would

⁵ As David Noon notes in "The Triumph of Death: National Security and Imperial Erasures in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*" (2007): "the continuing exchange of that ball, in fact, marks the only point of connection among the important figures in the novel" (87).

⁶ Interestingly, DeLillo's own recollection of the "shot heard round the world" was activated by a 1991 article on the 40th anniversary of the game, an event which was, in his own memory, somewhat hazy, recounting in a 2011 interview with Rafe Bartholomew that: "The event was located somewhere at the far reaches of memory, mine and many other peoples." As a result DeLillo states that: "some lingering aura persisted and finally sent me to the library, where I discovered news that startled me: on that same October day, the U.S. government announced that the Soviet Union had recently exploded an atomic bomb. The two events seemed oddly matched, at least to me, two kinds of conflict, local and global rivalries" (Bartholomew). From the very start then, the link perceived by DeLillo between the Soviet detonation and the "shot heard round the world" is one that has been activated by press remediation and DeLillo's own work of historical and memorial reconstruction, a task of reverse chronology which subsequently uncovers the strange and uncanny connections between multiple events. Curiously, this act of backwards reconstruction is also a significant theme within *Underworld* itself, particularly apparent in the attempts made to trace the various owners of the ball purported to be that hit into the stalls by Thomson during the 1951 game. As Noon notes, *Underworld* relies upon "an unusual (and mostly reversed) narrative chronology that calls attention to the novel's status as a deliberate and partial act of historical reminiscence" (84).

argue, hinges upon the way in which the narration of the game highlights to the reader that what is being described is not only situated in our past, but that the 1951 game is also taking place in the (fondly remembered) past of the novel. This is perhaps most obviously signalled in a passage that describes a haphazard act of archiving:

There's a man on 12th Street in Brooklyn who has attached a tape machine to his radio so he can record the voice of Russ Hodges broadcasting the game. The man doesn't know why he's doing this. It is just an impulse, a fancy, it is like hearing the game twice, it is like being young and being old, and this will turn out to be the only known recording of Russ' famous account of the final moments of the game. (DeLillo 32)

This reference to the recording of the tape and its wider dissemination at some future point underscores that the narrative we are being told belongs to the past of the novel. As Erik Grayson elaborates in "'On a Large Scale': Don DeLillo's Cold War Carnival" (2007), this is apparent because, "Simply by acknowledging the existence of the tape in the future, the narrator reveals that the 'now' of the novella is also the historical 'then' of years past" (104). This break in temporality is further built upon by being accompanied by the word "famous" (DeLillo 32) and the use of the clichéd phrase "the only known recording" (DeLillo 32), descriptions which both serve to heighten the reader's sense that what is being described is a past event that will be looked back on as a moment of significance. This is additionally built upon by the way the prologue ends with a description of events "all falling indelibly into the past" (DeLillo 60). These words, once again, serve as indications to the reader that this is a narrative recreation of an event that has long since passed into history, as well as tacitly signalling that this event will be of some significance in the later pages of the novel.

While the Dodgers-Giants game "falls indelibly into the past" (DeLillo 60) at the end of the prologue, this is a "past" that seems to be both collectively owned and belongs to the hazy, mythologized realm of memory rather than the cool detachment of history. Nora argues that there is a fundamental difference between memory and history,⁷ stating that:

⁷ Not uncontroversially, it must be said, for, as Michael Rothberg points out, "One consistent set of criticisms has targeted Nora's polarization of history and memory and

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. (Nora 8)

I would therefore contend that the account of the Dodgers-Giants game found in *Underworld* seems to adhere more closely to Nora's understanding of memory than it does as mere historical recreation. For example, in the main body of the novel, Sims relays his recollection of the Dodgers-Giants game to the BBC producer, Jane Farish, telling her "some of us had stopped the moment and kept it faithfully shaped" (DeLillo 94). However, the fixity of this event – something we would perhaps expect from a "historical" account – is problematized a couple of lines later when Sims acknowledges that "people claimed to have been present at the game who were not and how some of them honestly insisted that they were because the event had sufficient seeping power to make them think that they had to be at the Polo Grounds that day or else how did they feel the thing so strongly in their skin" (DeLillo 94). The fixity and veracity of any account of the Dodgers-Giants game therefore seems to only be provisional at best.

The questionable reliability of any account of the events that took place at the Polo Grounds in 1951 is additionally heightened by the lack of remediation and documentary evidence (apart from one precipitous copy of Russ Hodge's commentary) connected to the game. Indeed, part of the importance of the memory of the game seems to be linked to the fact that the event preceded the "communicational explosion" (Jameson 355) that manifested itself later on in the fifties and sixties and which ensured an abundant archive of remediated accounts of a wide range of collectively experienced events. The lack of documentary evidence connected to the game is underscored a number of times in *Underworld*. It comes most explicitly to the fore when Brian Glassic tells Jane Farish that "the Thomson homer continues to live because it happened decades

his seemingly progressive narrative of the former's eclipsing of the latter – hence, the central irony that a project that has helped stimulate a boom in the study of memory is premised on the demise of memory" (4).

ago when things were not replayed and worn out and run down and used up before midnight of the first day" (DeLillo 98). As Glassic's words explicitly demonstrate, the Dodgers-Giants game achieves primacy within the pages of *Underworld* as a site of memory, not of history. It is collectively valued by the characters within the novel because it belongs to the raw, mutable experience of memory; not the (over)mediated domain of history.

Finally, the focalisation of the sports commentator Russ Hodges throughout "The Triumph of Death" highlights the Dodgers-Giants game's position as a decidedly American lieu de mémoire. Obviously, on a very general level, baseball can be seen as a microcosm of American values and society, as noted by Grayson: "for many people, baseball celebrates and reaffirms the core values of American society" (94). However, in "The Triumph of Death" Hodges' focalising perspective explicitly situates the game as part of a collective people's history. At numerous points in the prologue Hodges reflects on the game in ways which position it as being "another kind of history" (DeLillo 59) and offers it up as an alternative narrative to that of "the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses" (DeLillo 60). However, Hodges's description of the match goes further than this, suggesting that not only is the game part of "the people's history" (DeLillo 60) but also stating that it "has flesh" (DeLillo 60). Such statements invest the events taking place within the Polo Grounds as something tangible and living, disrupting a merely historical understanding of the game and connecting it to the recollections of the living and thus positioning the game as a site of memory.

Ruptures and origins

The importance of the depiction of the Dodgers-Giants game in "The Triumph of Death" as a site of U.S. collective memory also hinges upon the event's connection to ideas of an unrecoupable lost innocence. As touched on above, part of the significance of the Dodgers-Giants game as a site of collective memory is its position as one of the last unmediated popular events to take place in North America. This aligns the game with Andreas Huyssen's suggestion, in "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia" (2000) that "One of modernity's permanent laments" (34) is the sense of a "loss of a better past, the memory of living in a securely circumscribed place, with a sense of stable boundaries and a place-bound culture with its regular flow of time and a core of permanent relations" (34).

However, the valorisation of the Dodgers-Giants game as a solely positive collective memory is problematized in "The Triumph of Death" by the way in which the events in the baseball stadium are brought into dialogue with the detonation of the USSR's second atomic bomb. The chief agent in aligning the game and the Soviet detonation is the focalising perspective of a fictionalised J. Edgar Hoover who is attending the game in the company of Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason. Hoover is alerted to the successful Soviet test during the game: "It seems the Soviet Union has conducted an atomic test at a secret location somewhere inside its own borders. They have exploded a bomb in plain unpretending language" (DeLillo 23). His foreknowledge of this fact, "The White House will make the announcement in less than an hour" (DeLillo 28), is that which allows the text to posit a connection between the two events. Hoover's perspective thus recontextualises the Dodgers-Giants game, opening up a perspective which sees it recast as a more problematic lieu de mémoire. Indeed, by introducing Hoover into "The Triumph of Death" DeLillo's novel turns the Dodgers-Giants game into a site of memory not only connected to a nostalgic "people's history" (DeLillo 60) of baseball, but the memory of the bipolar power relations which underscored the Cold War and the apocalyptic fears of mutually assured destruction which constantly simmered in the collective imagination.

Hoover's immediate reaction to the knowledge that the Soviet Union has detonated its second atomic bomb is to foreground the date in his own mind: "Edgar fixes today's date in his mind. October 3, 1951. He registers the date. He stamps the date" (DeLillo 23). In doing so, *Underworld* explicitly underscores the temporal resonance between the Soviet detonation and the more widely remembered occasion of the Dodgers-Giants game. After this, Hoover connects the Soviet detonation (and the potential death and destruction it could result in) to the American collective memory of the attack on Pearl Harbour: "He thinks of Pearl Harbour, just under ten years ago, he was in New York that day as well, and the news seemed to shimmer in the air, everything in photoflash, plain objects hot and charged" (DeLillo 24). By linking the Soviet test to the collective memory of the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour, Hoover reconfigures the Soviet detonation, and the wider Cold War of which it is symbolic, as one of profound anxiety for the United States. For, as Emily Rosenberg notes in *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (2003), following the successful Japanese attack that precipitated the United States entry into World War II, "the words 'Pearl Harbour' quickly became one of the most emotive icons in American

culture" (10). The link between Pearl Harbour and the Soviet detonation thus foreshadows the way in which throughout the fifties (and beyond) the Soviet Union was depicted as an existential threat to the United States by the institutions of power of which Hoover is representative.

This emotive, fearful response to the news of the detonation characterises Hoover's focalisation of the baseball game throughout "The Triumph of Death," to such an extent that he virtually sees (with the help of fragments of the Bruegel painting that gives the prologue its title) the Soviet bomb exploding in the Polo Grounds. Hoover does this in a manner that ironizes Russ Hodges's conception of the fraternal bonds that exist between the people at the Dodgers-Giants game, to reconceptualise the American polity as one being bound together, not by the aspects and objects that inform their daily lives, but via that which could signal their deaths: "All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction" (DeLillo 28). Hoover's narration thus ironically undercuts the collectivity enacted by the crowd at the ball game, demonstrating that Hodges's conception of the ballgame as part of a "people's history" (DeLillo 60) can never be completely divorced from its contextual relationship with the narratives of nations, leaders, and wars.

As the Dodgers-Giants game approaches its climax, its uncanny twinning with the Soviet detonation becomes more pronounced. Consequently, as the crowd begins to shower the pitch with torn up pages of magazines, these paper fragments take on the appearance of nuclear fallout: "Paper is falling again, crushed traffic tickets and field-stripped cigarettes and work from the office and scorecards in the shape of airplanes, windblown and mostly white" (DeLillo 37). The suggestion of fallout serves to further highlight the interconnection between the Soviet detonation and the Giants-Dodgers game, as noted by David Noon in "The Triumph of Death: National Security and Imperial Erasures in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*" (2007), who argues that: "the Giants-Dodgers game underscores the disarray of the historical moment in which it takes place; as Bobby Thompson circles the bases, the field is littered with garbage in a manner that is both celebratory and catastrophic" (88).

It is out of this flurry of obliterated cultural representations (symbolically foreshadowing the damage a nuclear war would inflict on the nice cosy world of fifties conspicuous consumption) that Hoover comes across fragments of

Bruegel's "The Triumph of Death" torn from the pages of a copy of *Life* magazine. Hoover's lurid fascination with the events depicted in the Bruegel painting becomes an implicit commentary on the threat of nuclear annihilation being visited on the crowd around him. This association is underscored by the way in which Hoover's focalisation shifts, in a short space of time, from the Bruegel: "The meatblood colors and massed bodies, this is a census taking of awful ways to die" (DeLillo 50), to an imagined image of the Soviet test site: "the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb" (DeLillo 50), and finally settles on the scene at the Polo Ground: "He looks up for a moment. He takes the pages from his face – it is a wrenching effort – and looks at the people on the field. Those who are happy and dazed" (DeLillo 51). If the movement in focalisation between the three scenes is not enough, the association is further foregrounded as Hoover leaves the stadium. Indeed, the mental association between the different images is made explicit as Hoover looks back on the euphoria taking place at the Polo Grounds: "There is something apparitional in the moment and it chills and excites him and sends his hand into his pocket to touch the bleak pages hidden there" (DeLillo 55). The link between "The Triumph of Death" and the *potential* triumph of death at the Polo Grounds thus serves to underscore the ever prevalent background fear of nuclear war that characterised the Cold War and which must necessarily be bound-up with more positive U.S. collective memories of the prosperity that defined the immediate years following the Second World War.

In addition to this, the Dodgers-Giants game is also brought into dialogue with the Soviet detonation because of the way in which the novel critiques supposedly "neutral" ideas regarding consumption – ideas which, it should be added, were diametrically opposed to the kind of centralised command economies found in the Soviet Union. This is the case because the various bits of paper and rubbish that shower down on the pitch problematize America's post-war consumer boom and the waste this produces. This becomes apparent in the way that the fragments of paper raining down on the pitch begin to be described, not in relation to their physical properties, but by the symbolism of that which is printed on them:

The pages keep falling. Baby food, instant coffee, encyclopedias and cars, waffle irons and shampoos and blended whiskeys. Piping times, an optimistic bounty that carries into the news pages where the nation's farmers record a bumper crop. And the resplendent

products, how the dazzle of a Packard car is repeated in the feature story about the art treasures of Prado. It is all part of the same thing. Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola. (DeLillo 39)

Not only do the brand names and news stories that rain down on the pitch form an alternate vocabulary and shared collective identity predicated on consumer capitalism, but, in their textual recreation as a kind of fallout, they are also implicitly foregrounded as a kind of alternate weapon to the USSR's bomb. This is an argument adhered to by Molly Wallace in "Venerated Emblems: DeLillo's *Underworld* and the History-Commodity" (2001), who argues that: "if the commodity is the 'chief ideological prop' in national self-definition in Cold War ideology, an ideological weapon emblematic of a capitalist economic system, the commodity is also intimately connected to the material weaponry of the Cold War" (374). Consequently, by having the crowd throw scrapes of paper down onto the pitch which display images of "the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battlefields or dead presidents" (DeLillo 39), *Underworld* highlights the way in which American consumerism can also be viewed as a weaponised economic system which, much like a nuclear bomb, creates a dangerous kind of waste.

Seen in these terms, the lieu de mémoire that constitutes the Dodgers-Giants game begins to manifest qualities that suggest it is not simply a site of nostalgia for an idealised fifties. By doubling the game with the successful detonation of the USSR's second atomic bomb, "The Triumph of Death" is remade as a point of rupture, arguably becoming the moment when the reality of a world dominated by ideologically-opposed, bipolar nuclear superpowers became a reality. It is in this regard that the Dodgers-Giants game can be seen to fulfil the criteria for the second type of event which Nora says can be considered a lieu de mémoire, recast as it is as one of "those miniscule events, barely remarked upon at the time, on which posterity retrospectively confers the greatness of origins, the solemnity of inaugural ruptures" (Nora 22). This point of rupture is then additionally emphasised by the consumerist symbolism found in the fragments of paper the crowd shower down on the pitch. By focusing on the jubilation of the crowd and the excesses of consumerism in their collective celebratory act, *Underworld* thus underscores the correspondence that exists between the USSR's development of nuclear warheads and the United States headlong dive into

systems of unadulterated consumerism, a system which ultimately bankrolled its own weapons programme.

Memory after the “End of History”

In *Underworld*'s epilogue, the ironically named “Das Kapital,” Nick Shay and Brian Glassic take a business trip to Kazakhstan to discuss a lucrative contract for waste disposal with the representative of a company called Tchaika. The Cold War has now ended (and, if Francis Fukayama is to be believed, history itself) and the “East” and “West” are now happily doing business with each other. Indeed, in many instances, the business being done revolves around the chaos and upheaval caused by the previous forty-odd years' worth of “conflict.” This is highlighted by the fact that Tchaika sells “nuclear explosions for ready cash. They want us to supply the most dangerous waste we can find and they will destroy it for us” (DeLillo 788).

After meeting their contact in Kazakhstan, Viktor Maltsev, Shay and Glassic are given a tour of sites wrecked by the nuclear brinkmanship engaged in by the USA and USSR. Stops along the way include the “Museum of Misshapens” (DeLillo 799), a museum filled with deformed fetuses, and a medical clinic filled with deformed children all wearing discarded t-shirts from a “Gay and Lesbian Festival in Hamburg, Germany” (DeLillo 800). Finally, they visit an abandoned nuclear test site. Here we read how the visitors “see signs in the distance, test dwellings blown off their foundations with people still inside, mannequins, and products on the shelves where they'd been placed maybe forty years ago [...] Old Dutch Cleanser and Rinso White, all those half lost icons of the old life” (DeLillo 793). Seeing the products in these houses evokes memories of the fifties for Shay, who asks himself “how strange it is, strange again, more strangeness, to feel a kind of homesickness for the things on the shelves in the houses that still stand” (793). This strange feeling of disconnect and nostalgia results in Shay asking Maltsev: “Viktor, does anyone remember why we were doing all this?” (DeLillo 793), to which Viktor glibly replies: “Yes, for contest. You won, we lost. You have to tell me how it feels. Big winner” (DeLillo 793). The exchange highlights the simultaneously complex and banal narrative that underpins the Cold War, foregrounding its wastefulness and catastrophic consequences, as well as underscoring its essential absurdity.

However, in addition to this, the exchange is important because it highlights not only DeLillo's refusal “to memorialize the Cold War by repeating

the triumphant palaver that greeted its conclusion" (Noon 105), but also demonstrates how any remembrance of the Cold War needs to adequately take into account the interpenetration of memories and history and the way in which the "conflict" necessarily resists a simple explanation. Indeed, given that the Cold War was an "event" experienced by civilian populations in a way no other previous war had, it is important to remember, as Lowe and Joel note, that "The cold war as a context is seemingly as important, in its remembering, as the Cold War as a unique form of war" (224). It is perhaps for this reason that the Cold War has received so little memorialisation in the United States, because any monument constructed in relation to the conflict would necessarily have to simplify a narrative in which "everything is connected" (DeLillo 825).

Similarly, it could be argued that the failure of commemoration that accompanied the end of the Cold War is predicated on the fact that in many ways the narratives that underpinned the "conflict" have not yet run their course and continue to have an impact on policy decisions in the present. This is pointed out by Kwon, who notes that:

The world does not look back on the cold war with a single, united perspective; nor can we say, for that matter, that the world is experiencing the ending of the bipolar world in an identical way. How people think about a bipolar history is conditioned by how they experienced it, which in turn shapes what they make of the future. (Kwon 150)

Indeed, given that the idea of the "Cold War" is still deployed as a convenient narrative to explain wildly disparate situations such as the Soviet annexation of Crimea and the current events in Ukraine, the Iraq War, the goals of Al Qaeda⁸ and the war in Syria, it could be argued that in many ways the Cold War, and the thinking that underpinned it, has yet to end.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that the Cold War remains a difficult "conflict" to memorialise and is a problematic site around which a framework of collective memory can be erected. However, I have shown that novels such as DeLillo's *Underworld* attempt this memorialisation in necessarily complex ways, and in a

⁸ For further discussion of the continuing use of the Cold War please see Hoogland Noon.

manner that recalls Nora's lieux de mémoire. In particular, I have suggested that the narrative of the novel's prologue, "The Triumph of Death," reconfigures the 1951 Dodgers-Giants National League Final as a very particular site of memory within *Underworld*, and that in many ways this game can be seen as a textual example of a lieu de mémoire. I have contended that DeLillo deploys a number of narrative techniques in order to foreground the way in which the game is viewed as site of memory by the various characters in the novel.

In the first instance I did so by arguing that the prologue's narrative breaks the temporal frame in such a way as to reconfigure the game as an act of "anticipated commemoration" (Nora 20). Secondly, I have suggested that, by bringing the game into dialogue with the Soviet's detonation of a second atomic bomb and contrasting this event with the burgeoning consumer economy of the U.S. in the fifties, the text recreates the event as what Nora refers to as a site of "inaugural rupture" (22). In conclusion, I would thus argue that despite *Underworld's* depiction of the Dodgers-Giants game as a potential lieu de mémoire to the U.S. collective memory of the latter half of the twentieth century, the actual event that was the Cold War remains a problematic site of memory because of the sheer complexity of the way in which it unfolded. As such, any engagement with the event is one that needs to take account of the unique interpenetration of history and memory which necessarily underscored this conflict of global magnitude – a conflict, I hasten to add, with a legacy which seems to have significant implications for the present and the future.

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Encountering Unruly Bodies: Posthuman and Disabled Bodies in *Under the Skin*

LIEKE HETTINGA^{*1}

Abstract: Science-fiction cinema offers ample cases of strange encounters, but the most intriguing are those that offer critical insights into our worldliness. The film Under the Skin (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) does exactly this by turning our gaze not to imaginations of the future but to the otherness within, defamiliarizing the category of the human in the process. In this paper, I explore how the category of the human is bound by normative conceptions of embodiment by critically reflecting on the relationship between visibility and embodiment, representation of disability, and the politics of looking at unusual bodies. Taking inspiration from Alison Kafer's work, I propose that Under the Skin deploys a novel perspective on marginalized embodiment, considered from the contemporary context of the political status of disability in Western culture.

Keywords: science fiction, disability, embodiment, human, visibility.

The greater violence would be to assume that the particularity of the other is within our grasp, that the place of the other is fully accountable from the "outside." The issue, then, is one not only of contesting the epistemological and ontological boundaries of bodies of knowledge and bodies of matter, but of reconfiguring the ethics of relationship. (Shildrick, "You" 161)

* Lieke Hettinga is a recent graduate of the research master's program Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam.

¹ This paper builds on my research master's thesis. A version of this paper was presented at the *Unruly Bodies* conference in Brussels, 2015.

The title of the film *Under the Skin* (2013) suggests that it will get under our skin, promising a visceral experience. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the expression designates what is there in reality as opposed to what is there in mere appearance, on the level of the skin. Director Jonathan Glazer communicates both these meanings by offering an erotic, horrific science-fiction film in which human and nonhuman appearances are confused. Scarlett Johansson performs the main role of an unnamed alien in human form as she roams the dark and murky streets of Scotland in a white minivan. The alien is on a mission as she preys on unsuspecting men: she flirts and seduces them, after which she kills them. Both the impromptu conversations recorded with hidden cameras and the dialogues with professional actors are marked with a sense of unscripted realism. Johansson dominates the film with her enchanting screen presence, demanding the viewer's attention. Our relation to the alien is formed by particular visual techniques: long close-up shots of the alien's face ask the viewer to overcome any distance to her. For most of the duration of the film we either look at the alien, or we look *with* her as the camera follows her gaze on the cityscape. From the start, this primarily visual experience is an investigation into her body and into how convincingly she can appear as human.

The expression "under the skin" also alludes to how the skin as a site that usually functions as a boundary between subjects and/or objects might falter: something is able to pass through this boundary, getting under the skin. The skin creates the fiction of the unitary containment of the body (Shildrick, "Why" 16). The excess of the body is what gets under our skin. The expression is highly affective, pointing to both a state of feeling and a somatic reaction. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler writes about the way our bodies are given over to the world of others from the start: "the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch" (21). In line with an understanding of the body as always relational, I explore how *Under the Skin* enacts an encounter in which the legibility of the body is negotiated. Specifically, I look at a scene in which the posthuman protagonist encounters someone whose face is disfigured (played by Adam Pearson). This moment offers a scene of possibility to critically think of how non-normative bodies are encountered.

This paper is structured as follows: I begin with an introduction to the film *Under the Skin* and a close reading of the above-mentioned scene. In the following section I draw on disability studies (David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson) to analyze how marginalized embodiment

is represented. I pay particular attention to the relationship between visibility and embodiment, representation of disability, and the politics of looking at unusual bodies. I then conduct an analysis on the level of narrative, and argue that the film deploys a novel perspective on marginalized embodiment, considered from the contemporary context of the political status of disability in Western culture. Alison Kafer's work *Feminist, Queer, Crip* serves as my guide here. Overall, I illustrate how the film *Under the Skin* enacts an encounter between various forms of marginalized embodiment that resists familiar tropes of representation, and in fact might offer a radical perspective on broadening the landscape of the "human."

Unruly encounters

A critical reflection on what the "human" entails provides the framework of my interpretation of *Under the Skin*. The film, based on a novel by Michael Faber (2000) with the same title, invites the viewer to conspire with the alien's perspective of this world. The cinematography and soundscape of the film deliver a truly alienating experience in which our world suddenly appears strange. As the alien imitates rituals of gender performance by going to a shopping mall and learning how to dress and put on make-up, she makes the well established and the mundane seem unfamiliar. The film reveals a horrific storyline as the alien's seductions culminate into macabre but visually stunning killing scenes in which the bodies of her victims are eviscerated. Due to the prominent screen presence of the protagonist, subtle changes in her demeanour are directly noticeable as signs of a critical character transformation. Where at first she seemed distant, mechanic, and cold, she later appears confused, unsettled, and empathetic. The transformation takes place in a scene featuring a strange encounter, one that pierces through her script, undoing the alienness programmed in her body. She abandons her extraterrestrial mission and becomes an unruly alien that desires to be human.

The film's concern with the process of an alien becoming human provokes reflection on the tenuous boundaries of the nonhuman and human. The director has made the choice to present the alien in human form, rather than a form that would make it more unfamiliar. The difference we come upon in *Under the Skin* is that between human and nonhuman, but this difference is hard to trace in the embodiments encountered by the viewer. It becomes unclear if there is an ontological distinction to be made between the human appearance and that

which supposedly lies behind the human form. From the film I discern an explicit questioning of the role of the body in occupying the category of the “human.”

The film’s posthumanist perspective creates an opportunity to re-evaluate the normative regulation of what kinds of embodiments are considered human. Judith Butler has argued that there are strong normative notions on what kind of embodiment the human has, and that one’s racialized and/or gendered body or bodily abilities may not suffice for occupying the category of the human (*Precarious Life* 33). From this framework, I specifically track how marginalized embodiment features in this film.

The scene I would like to discuss here is set on a dark, rainy evening, and the alien is driving her white minivan through deserted streets on the lookout for another prey. She spots a man walking on the sidewalk, parks the van ahead, and waits for him to walk by. She calls him over to ask for directions, and we learn he is on his way to the supermarket. His face is hidden underneath his hood, and when she offers to give him a ride, only his silence indicates his hesitation. The film was shot using only natural light sources, creating intensely dark scenes like this one. In the blinking indicator light of the car we can roughly see patches of his face, but it remains hard to discern. The scene creates an atmosphere of suspense. On the one hand, the viewer knows more than the man does: we know what kind of fate he will meet by entering the van and we might hope he turns down the offer. On the other hand, we might also worry for her safety. By hiding his face under his hood, the passerby gives an ominous impression. For a moment, it becomes unclear where the element of danger is located in this situation.

He enters the car, buckles his seatbelt, and they drive off. He takes off his hood and uncovers his face. The alien says, “That’s better.” She wants him to feel comfortable in order to reach the intimacy that will allow her to seduce and annihilate him. But the moment she says “That’s better,” is also the moment we see the side of his face, illuminated by the ceiling light of the van. He has a disfigured face caused by neurofibromatosis: non-cancerous tumours grow on his face. I can locate his eyes, but they are hardly visible from this angle, clouded by lumps on his face. He turns toward the camera and toward her, carefully checking if she is staring at him. But instead of staring, she starts a conversation. The alien takes him home and as they undress it appears the man will meet the same fate as the other victims. However, the alien changes her mind and lets the man escape. We see him walking into a field – stark naked – with city lights visible in

the distance, and fear the violence he will face trying to get home. This encounter functions as the major turning point in the film. It is the first time the alien refuses to carry out a murder, thereby abandoning her mission and escaping the surveillance of her handler. In the remainder of the film she tries to blend in as a “normal” human which creates many awkward and comical scenes.

The premise of *Under the Skin* both depends on, and plays with, patriarchal culture. Ostensibly, the alien can succeed in her mission on earth by showing off her attractive body, following particular sexual and gender relations in the public sphere. This deployment of the gendered body does more than just repeat images of a woman as a hyper-sexualized object. It utilizes these images to create a horror film in which the gendered distribution of death and killing in patriarchy is inverted. She is a sci-fi femme fatale who uses the status of the female gendered body in Western culture for the purpose of her extraterrestrial mission. The explicitly voyeuristic nature of her encounter with men on the street undoes the male gaze we are accustomed to in Western visual culture, and the viewer conspires with her objectifying stares. The viewer might fear for her safety, but the alien has yet to discover the dangers of misogyny – which she does: she is assaulted by men on the street and realizes that the body she uses to get access to men is also at risk of violence. She is in her van when several men try to open the doors, bang on the windows, and scream at her. She manages to drive off, and moments later she picks up the man with the disfigured face. Shocked into awareness of her female gendered body, she learns of the risks of femininity. This risk remains to haunt her and culminates in the final scene, where a logger chases her through the forest in an attempt to rape her. Her human body unravels in this sexual assault, revealing the shiny, black mass that constitutes her alien body.

Her awareness of the risk of femininity is highly relevant to her encounter with the disfigured man and for understanding why this particular encounter changes her. I interpret this scene as a moment of recognition: both subjects know what it means for your body to be excluded by society, to the point of always being at risk of violence. By encountering a form of marginalized embodiment, she recognizes her own subject position in the human world for the first time. Having gained insight into the violence that accompanies marginalized embodiment, she decides to abandon her deadly mission. In the following two sections I explore this representation of marginalized embodiment on a visual and on a narrative level.

The visibility of non-normative embodiment

The disfigurement of the unnamed character features as part of a rich archive of representing non-able-bodied embodiment. In their book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder explore the “meanings assigned to disability as a representational identity” (1). They examine the ubiquitous presence of disability in narrative art and argue that disability features a “disruptive potentiality” which is used to differentiate a character from the norm (47-49). Consequently, Mitchell and Snyder propose, “one might think of disability as the master trope of human disqualification” (3). In Mitchell and Snyder’s critique of narrative art they show how disabled bodies and minds are disruptive for the plot – a function in narrative that can only work by virtue of real life disqualification – and are always in need of repair through a prosthesis (8). A prosthesis is understood to compensate for a lack by bringing the deviance marking the disabled body back to a corporeal regime of acceptable deviance (Mitchell and Snyder 6). Consequently, a narrative prosthesis occurs when a disabled body or mind is marked as improper to the social context and the narrative aims to overcome this problem (Mitchell and Snyder 47, 53).

In *Under the Skin*, the particular disfigurement of the man appears to be the same as the subject featured in David Lynch’s film *Elephant Man* (1980). By casting an actor with neurofibromatosis, the film explicitly engages with the most prominent case of facial disfigurement in cinematic history. *Elephant Man* has been criticized for crafting a spectacle out of deformity following the tradition of the freak show (Mitchell and Snyder 23). The freak show haunts representations of disability. In this archive of disfigurement as a spectacle, the assumed way of looking is as a non-disabled spectator, and the physically different body is marked by its shock value. With its sentimental and moralizing qualities, the film *Elephant Man* and its representational style follow the formula of narrative prosthesis that Mitchell and Snyder put forward (Durbach 35).

At a first glance, it seems that *Under the Skin* perpetuates this practice by depicting the man hiding in the dark evening under his hood, bringing his face under a beam of light, and focusing on his face through voyeuristic close-up shots. These techniques employ disfigurement as something to be revealed and to be lingered on. The light from above emphasizes an exhibitionary setting. We can think of W. J. T. Mitchell’s pertinent question: “What do pictures want?” and respond: This image wants us to stare.

However, I suggest that the interaction between the alien and the disfigured man does not represent disfigurement as either a spectacle, as a problem to overcome, as a familiar trope of characterization, or as a deviance in need of repair through the narrative. The film does not indulge in presenting disability as located on the site of the body and instead shows two marginalized subjects whose interaction leaves undetermined which body is improper to the social context. Disfigurement as it is evoked here is not the ultimate disqualification that is used to visually differentiate a character but instead functions as an unsentimental moment of recognition between two subjects.

Due to the infrequent presence of dialogue and the lack of voice-over narration, the encounter is primarily visual. The moment the disfigured man enters the van I wonder what will happen. Perhaps my main question is: Will the alien *notice*? Whereas previous scenes left the audience to wonder if the alien would pass as human in the midst of all the mundane humanness, this scene elicits curiosity to see if the man will pass as human for the alien. The man seems to wonder the same, as he hesitantly looks her way to see if she is staring at him. But she affords him the same look as any other object in the environment she is exploring, while also noticing that this encounter is different from her previous encounters with men. This scene evokes a moment in which the bodies are looked at in new ways.

Even when analyzing this scene, I am prompted to rethink how I encounter this body: how I describe it and how I write about it. Are “disfigured” and “disabled” appropriate categories to use in my analysis? Are the connotations of the term “disfigured” not bound to reproduce a normative reading of unusual bodies, which I am actually trying to challenge in my argument? What are the advantages for me to describe his face as disfigured and his appearance as disabled? The film does not offer me help here, since the character is claiming no identity of disability. In this absence, I am motivated to classify his body and it is made completely my choice. I am immediately compelled to bring his disfigurement into the discursive regime of medical knowledge by saying “he has a disfigured face caused by neurofibromatosis...” I can refer back to interviews with Adam Pearson to find out that, indeed, disfigurement is a term he uses himself, and that his role in *Under the Skin* has led him to reflect more on disability on display in narrative film (Day; Pearson). His use and experience of these categories allow me to reproduce them. But I could also insist that his disfigurement is crucial to my argument. The disfigured face brings attention to

what it means to inhabit an unruly body. "Disfigure" is primarily used as a verb, where one destroys the beauty of, or deforms, something. It is a negation of the figure, in this case of the form of the human body. Questions are opened up: Who is doing the disfiguring? Which human figure is maintained? Disfigurement haunts the boundary of the human form, of what a human body can look like. My reaction only highlights how the materiality of the body cannot be met outside of how I have always met bodies through the lens of particular corporeal norms.

The complex relationship between the visual encounter of bodies and the knowledge that arises from that encounter is at the heart of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's book *Staring: How We Look*. Garland-Thomson explores the staring encounter in order to dissect the ways we see each other and the ways we are seen (10). She analyzes a very common interaction: an unusual body catches someone's attention. The attention takes the form of a staring interaction, the "starer" fixing the other in the position of the "staree." We stare at bodies that contradict our expectations of what a body can look like. The starer-staree transaction is imbued with power relations and possible actions or developments. The staree can stare back, redirect the gaze, educate the starer, or account for the stareable sight and thereby explain the inexplicable interruption of the visual field. In some cases, staring might lead to an acknowledgement between fellow outsiders or an empathetic relation. But in the end, what will happen in the encounter is unpredictable. In Garland-Thomson's analysis of staring at extraordinary bodies, the visual presence of disability leaves the outcome of the encounter uncertain since the usual cultural guidelines do not suffice (86). When we stare, we try to make legible what at first sight seemed incomprehensible (*Staring* 15). For Garland-Thomson, the staring interaction is motivated by a desire to gain knowledge about the bodies that catch our eye, and therefore "can offer an opportunity to recognize each other in new ways" (15).

Films, images, or paintings can grant us "permission to stare," turning the social blunder of staring into a productive encounter (*Staring* 81). This is not to say that mere visual representation of unusual bodies can function as an assurance of negating oppression. As Mitchell and Snyder point out, the social erasure of disabled people has occurred in the midst of the creation and circulation of images (6). The challenge is to enlarge the visual landscape and to expand the range of bodies we expect to see, without building on sentimental representationalist tropes, or turning visibility itself into a precondition for disability justice. In *Under the Skin*, the viewer experiences a prolonged exposure

to bodies that often make people feel uncomfortable, drawing the staring interaction and the discomfort to the foreground. The impulse of staring can turn into a contemplative looking, creating an opportunity to unlearn the prejudice associated with disfigured bodies.

In my opinion, this film thus manages to successfully set up a visual encounter, both between the two bodies on screen and between those bodies and the viewer, that troubles assumptions about the resonances of the disabled body in contemporary Western culture, allowing them to be reassessed. If the epidermis is the prosthesis that allows the alien to mimic the human, the disfigured man signals to the skin as the site of bodily differentiation. The film does not construct an image of how we are all alike under the skin, but sticks to the situatedness of particular embodiments. I take this scene to offer an image of what a non-appropriative relationality might look like that does not ignore the materiality of bodies but that leaves space for looking at bodies in new ways.

Politicizing embodiment

On the level of *visuality*, *Under the Skin* manages to portray disfigured embodiment without crafting a spectacle out of it. In addition, I propose that the implications from the film's narrative are quite extensive. After all, the basic premise of the film is that this alien is a murderous creature who does not shy away from killing men and eviscerating their bodies. I understand the alien's decision to let the disfigured man escape as a re-imagination of the place of disability in society.

Ableist imaginations of the present and the future are a prime concern in Alison Kafer's book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. She analyzes how disabled bodies are seen as a symbol of an undesired future, where the "value of a disability-free future is seen as self-evident" (2). Kafer examines a wide range of theories and social movements and tracks both how disabled bodies are seen as having no future, and how the future is imagined as having no disabled bodies. Time, money, and effort is put into reproductive technologies that promise a future free of disabled children, while services for actual disabled people are cut, ensuring that disabled people do not live long lives (41).

Feminist, Queer, Crip's theoretical punch comes from the political/relational model of understanding disability that Kafer proposes. Her argument is situated in the wake of both the medical and the social model of disability, which according to her fail to take the political nature of disability into

consideration (4-8). She defines disability as neither an exclusively medical problem nor an exclusively social problem: disability is not pathological and neither just a matter of social exclusion, but a social phenomenon with material, embodied experiences (6-8). A sharp distinction between the embodied experience of disability and the social exclusion of disability leaves the issue of social exclusion as the only possible site of contestation (7). This has as an effect that the social exclusion of disabled people is seen as undesirable, but often leaving intact the all too common assumption that impairment and diverse forms of embodiment in the world are undesirable. For Kafer, the point is to understand the physical impairment of the body or mind as a political issue as well, and not something which has a self-evident meaning. I find her analysis very fruitful because it emphasizes how the body is a political category, and we can hold on to the materiality of disability while simultaneously understanding that the meaning of disability is open to change.

Under the Skin is intensely situated in the present-day, but by virtue of its science-fiction genre and futuristic elements often comes across as an anachronism, inhabiting both the present and future at once. According to Rosi Braidotti, the genre of science fiction is concerned with “the defamiliarization of the ‘here and now’ rather than dreams of possible futures” (184). Indeed, this film does not offer a utopia, but new ways of imagining the present. By analyzing the status of disability through the focal point of futurity, Kafer exposes how orientations to the future depart from ableist imaginations. As she notes, “the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently” (28). The unfolding of events in *Under the Skin* emanates an affective sense of doing the present differently. The alien had seduced the disfigured man and brought him home to be eliminated, and then she decides against it. In the contemporary context of the undesirability of non-normative embodiment or disability, this scene imagines otherwise and makes a political statement on what kinds of bodies we can consider as belonging to the human landscape.

Reimagining the present

In this paper I have set out my argument that the film *Under the Skin*, and specifically a particular scene of encounter in this film, allows for a reimagining of non-normative embodiment, by troubling typical meanings assigned to disabled

bodies in representations. In addition, the posthuman perspective presents the viewer with the challenge of looking at how bodies may or may not fit into the normative category of the human. The film affirms the potential of visual culture to unlearn a regime of corporeal norms that maintains the marginalization of particular embodiments.

The following quote from Judith Butler captures the aim of my analysis: "What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to be something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be?" (*Undoing Gender* 35). Images like the ones in *Under the Skin* defamiliarize how we look at bodies and thereby enable encounters that sustain non-normative bodies, ideally translating new ways of looking at bodies on the screen to the encounters between bodies on the street.

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How to Hang a Song on a Wall: Experiencing Björk's *Black Lake* Installation

KYLE FAGEOL*

Abstract: Björk's Black Lake installation debuted in spring 2015, bringing a novel and site-specific experience of her music to a midcareer retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Consisting of two coordinated film screens and an immersive sculpture/audio installation, the piece developed upon the studio song "Black Lake" by offering a multilayered experience of it to visitors. This essay deconstructs the modalities at play in the installation – aural, visual, spatial, and experiential – and makes sense of their unified expression. Citing underpinnings in music video and installation art theory, this essay works to qualify an experience of this uniquely crossmedial piece.

Keywords: installation art, modality, visitor experience, music visualization, spatiality.

Introduction

Black Lake was a temporary media installation which was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City and exhibited there as a part of the *Björk* retrospective from 8 March to 7 June 2015. As a work resulting from a two-year collaboration between a music artist (Björk), a video director (Andrew Thomas Huang), a curatorial team (lead by Klaus Biesenbach at MoMA), an architecture firm (The Living), and a software engineering company (Autodesk), *Black Lake* is a multimedia, multimodal text worthy of dissection. Initially hesitant to consent to the midcareer retrospective, Björk voiced concern for the intermedial reconfiguration of the music medium which she considers to be her professional foreground: "how do you hang a song

* Kyle Fageol is a recent graduate of the master's program of Comparative Arts and Media Studies at VU University Amsterdam.

on a wall? If she were going to do a retrospective, the existing museum practices for formatting sound would have to change from tinny speakers emitting noises in darkened alcoves into something entirely unfamiliar” (Witt §16). For the museum visitor, *Black Lake* was described as a “new sound and video installation” (“Introductory Wall Text” §3).

The installation was the physical expression of Björk’s song of the same name, released on her 2015 studio album *Vulnicura*. It featured two panoramic screens on either side of a dark room displaying slightly different yet complimentary ten minute edits of footage shot in Björk’s native Iceland by director Huang. The coordination of the two film tracks¹ follows² Björk’s visceral performance of her song about heartbreak, the thematic main event of her self-declared heartbreak album ([Björk] 22 Jan. 2015). She is alone, singing theatrically and method acting anguish by way of aimless staggering, body convulsions, aggressive pounding, and eventual exhausted collapse across an otherworldly landscape of dark caves, rough ravines, and volcanic explosions. The more hopeful climax, driven by Autodesk’s CGI effects, has her ascending seemingly divinely and then walking with a smiling confidence into the markedly lighter environment in which she has finally found peace. The exhibition room itself was designed as an apparent extension of the cave featured on film, with more than 7,000 felt cones on the walls and ceiling recreating the rough texture of rocks or barnacles. These meticulously constructed cones served to soundproof the room’s forty-nine high definition loudspeakers from the rest of the museum, and their size and placement referenced and mapped the sound properties of the song.

The composite expressions of the installation are difficult to capture without a visit, thus – as is asserted by Björk both lyrically and visually in the climax – this paper will work systematically through them as they “[burn off] layer by layer” (Björk, “Black Lake”) in order to reach the work’s experiential core. When Björk asks “how do you hang a song on a wall?” she is, of course, problematizing something more than the crossmedial difficulties of a song being expressed as a

¹ “Film tracks” is used here to distinguish the film playing on either screen in the *Black Lake* installation from the “film object” which is the composite filmic text as would be experienced by a simultaneous expanded cinema viewing. The film object is still intact as a pair of film tracks and viewable online (Björk, “Black Lake (Two Screen Version)).

² The film object is described here in present tense as it is composed of recorded pieces. The same can be said about further discussion of other Björk texts which exist in their various permanent forms. Only the installation and the exhibition in which it was embedded are described here in past tense, since experiences of them as they are here described were temporally bound.

material work. She is metaphorically problematizing the particular expression of a song for presentation in an art gallery, especially in the context of her retrospective. To explore this work as such, this paper will employ theory on media installation art in a hermeneutical analysis of the various modalities at play in this piece. It will work from the aural, to the visual, to the spatial, and finally to the experiential. This outward development from the more concrete song text at the heart of the installation to the more nebulous contingencies at the conceptual reaches of the work reflects the increasing abstraction present at each of its modal levels.

The immediately following first section will first establish the museum context as a new platform for audiovisuality in Björk's work, an essential first step in articulating what is special about the modality of a gallery presentation. The second section will call upon music video theory to provide a framework for the translation of an aural expression to a visual one. This theoretical discourse will be adapted from its more conservative grounding in the moving image medium and brought to the gallery modality, reading the installation's sound-sourced visuals as a music visualization similar to that of the music video format.

The third section will develop the screen interface as critical in the spectator's understanding of spatiality, especially within the physicality of the installation in which they are positioned. Analysis throughout the paper will often distinguish between the "here" of the physical space of the material installation and the "there" of the virtual space of the film object which is essentially a music video³ meshed between the two film tracks. This will aid in making sense of the various modes of spatiality at play in the intermedial experience and is especially purposed to implement Kate Mondloch's "here and there" media installation art theory which is at the crux of this paper's discourse.

The fourth section will further engage media installation art theory, segueing into a discussion of the visitor's experiential immersion in the previously developed spatiality. In particular, it will employ writings on *video* installation art (Morse and Ratti); however, since the theories are more generally about the presentation of the moving image medium and not about the specifics of the video image (usually framed as a quality, convenience, and thus accessibility argument against film), they can be used mindfully in this analysis of filmic media installation art. It will develop an applied interpretation of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura in a work of art through the lens of these media installation art

³ Vernallis points to the various expressions of music video beyond its formative music television platform, concluding that "we can thus define music video, simply, as a relation of sound and image that we recognize as such" (11).

theories. This will take the form of an underlying “here and now” of experience in the media installation.

The conclusion will tie together these various hermeneutical analyses at each modal level to reach a general understanding of how the exhibition’s visitors would have experienced the work. This paper’s conclusion seeks to account for the otherwise vaguely qualifiable impact which the complex and provocative work *Black Lake* has on the visitor through a focused analysis of its layered expressions. It will make sense of the various expressions familiar to the gallery modality – aural, visual, spatial, experiential – developing each with respect to its potential for a song’s crossmedial (re)interpretation.

Museum context, gallery format

Prior to the MoMA retrospective, most of Björk’s audiovisual releases took the form of traditional music videos released as visual accessories to the studio song singles which they illustrate. These productions are recorded and thus widely distributable experiences of music visualization broadcast on music television, streamed online, or otherwise available as downloaded or data-storage written video files. The usual mode of viewing these productions was itself solidified in the *Björk* exhibition, with the feature of a cinema space which screened, in chronological succession, thirty-two of her official music video releases. Here, the museum spectator was primed to a familiar viewership where they were (generally) static and frontally positioned before a screen, subsumed into the flow of the music video’s “there” space, and ideally forgetting entirely about their physical presence in any sort of “here” space. This system of familiar viewership was, for all intents and purposes, consistent with other instances of music video viewership – music television programming, video on demand service streaming, et cetera.

In the body of Björk’s audiovisual releases, only two instances of her more recent work stand outside of the conventional mode of music video spectatorship. Her 2008 music video for “Wanderlust” was stereoscoped by Encyclopedia Pictura so that it is available, with the use of 3D glasses, as a three-dimensional viewing experience. This creates a perceptive immersion in the on-screen virtual space which is slightly different from the more customary (screen-) distanced filmic viewing. Björk’s 2011 studio album *Biophilia* was simultaneously released as a so-called “app album” for mobile touchscreen devices, where each song was treated with a suite of interactive features. The idiosyncratic and user-manipulated associations between audio and visual for each of the album’s songs has been described as “digital music videos and, therefore, as one example of the

extension and diversification of traditional music video" (Dibben 686). In another paper, I develop the app album as a remediation of the music video format, "an audiovisual experience of music brought to a platform of true mobility by specifically tending to its interactivity in order to entertain prosumer-specific⁴ modality" (Fageol 58). This digital package of audiovisual releases does indeed have an interactive immersion much different than the cinematic nature of music video viewing; however, the immersion is virtual, existing within the text and mediated through the mobile device screen interface. This is different from the physical immersion asked of a media installation visit, where the interface is the embodied presence amidst the materiality of the work itself.

Black Lake was the first site-specific and thus non-distributable work of accessory audiovisuality to a studio song by Björk, of course excluding the familiar format of live performance. As an installation located in MoMA and displayed as a part of her retrospective exhibition, it was an act of embracing its gallery setting. This conformity was remarkably different from the critical event of bombing a contemporary art museum at the climax of her 1995 *Army of Me* music video. Perhaps it was closer to her platform-adaptive works which had previously earned their respective places among the permanent collection of MoMA: the 1999 *All Is Full of Love* music video in 2002 and the *Biophilia* app in 2013. Much like the *Black Lake* installation, these works embrace digital technology to bring new experiences of audiovisuality to their – respectively – viewer and user. As reception of *Black Lake* was indebted to this white cube⁵ valorization system of the gallery, it was also embedded in the art historical context of the museum. Thus, it is approachable here as a work at the nexus of many art media: (experimental) film, expanded cinema, installation. In short, it is understood here simply as a media installation.

In fact, Biesenbach reports that the "exhibition is not about Björk's art, it is Björk's art – an attempt to transform forever how a musician's work might be presented in the context of a museum" (Witt §16). The other features of the exhibition – mainly presented as a narrative, location-triggered audio guide through various document, costumes, and artefacts called "Songlines" – were more or less re-presentations of and insights into memorabilia of Björk's past

⁴ "Prosumer" is a term adapted from Vernallis. It is an amalgamation of "producer" and "consumer," referring to the revolutionary users who have increasingly participated in the Web 2.0 movement by both producing and consuming bodies of online content (for example, on YouTube).

⁵ "White cube" here refers to the white-walled exhibition convention of contemporary art museums/galleries in which a work's inclusion implies a place in the progress narrative of art history/the evaluative rubric of art criticism.

artistry. The *Black Lake* installation was the only truly novel work of art introduced by the curatorial team, and it was the first case of expanded modality granted to the studio song. Thus, *Black Lake* was a practice in how Björk's originally aural medium can also be a visual, spatial, and experiential one: hallmark modalities of the museum-based text encounter.

Aural made visual – hear and see

Music video theorist Mathias Bonde Korsgaard argues in his 2013 text "Music Video Transformed" that "any music video operates by visually remediating⁶ music (recasting a preexisting song visually), but also by musically remediating the image (structuring the image according to musical logic)" (509). Thus, the film tracks on both screens in the *Black Lake* installation fulfill the music visualization qualification of the music video format. Björk's performance – singing, expressive dancing, and indirect instrumentation (pounding into the air or on rocks referentially to the beat of the song) – are examples of music visualization according to Sven Carlsson's concept of the performance clip as music video visual tradition (§28-§30). Likewise, cinematic qualities such as quick cuts during the building techno beats in the song's middle section and extended shots, slow pans, and/or fade transitions in the song's many periods of droning reverberation are examples of image musicalization. Hence, the film's image content illustrates the song; the film's form behaves or "moves" in manners which are referential to the song's composition.

The collaborative team installing *Black Lake* designed a visualization of music unique to the work itself: the room's felt cone layout. Art critic Melena Ryzik aptly encapsulates the translation, stating that the team "turned the song into a literal blueprint, mapping the music's volume and frequency" (§6). This blueprint manifested itself in the room's dimensional façade, a sort of topography of the song's structure. Although its design was idiosyncratic and perhaps immediately cryptic, it was nonetheless an imaged response to the song's musical logic and thus worked theoretically in ways similar to music video visuality. The difference, of course is that music video is, at its most elemental, an interpretive visualization of music with temporal arrangement, while the room's topography

⁶ "Remediation" is defined by Bolter and Grusin in their seminal 1999 text *Remediation: Understanding New Media* as "the representation of one medium in another" (45). It is a media theory which has been used often in discussions of intermedial/crossmedial textual phenomena; however, it deserves more unpacking than the scope of this paper allows. Thus, it will not be used as an analytical tool and instead only given place as the term described above.

was an interpretive visualization of music with spatial arrangement. Spatial arrangement implies sculptural image as opposed to the temporally arranged moving image by which the film medium is defined. Thus, the sculptural felt cone installation can hereby be considered to have been a room-based visualization of music. The Living's head designer, David Benjamin, explains the installation's functional use of this concept: "every second of the song is one inch of the room [...] it's kind of the groove in the record. It's abstract" (Cruz §16).

Just as there is capability for the evocation of heartbreak in the filmic interpretation of music as image, there is also such in the sculptural interpretation of music as image. Taken together, the sculpture object represented cave walls which evoked a gloomy ambience parallel to that in the film object. Björk conceives of the cave as a space for "shutting herself from the world, getting over her wounds" ("Bjork: Making of Black Lake" 08:10). Its place both onscreen and in the screening room called upon the song's theme of dealing with heartbreak, delivering it in two- and three-dimensional visibility to the installation's visitor. The music was heard and its interpretation seen in both the filmic "there" and sculptural "here" during a visit to the installation, which thus brought the aural to the spatial dimension by way of the visual.

Visual made spatial – here and there

Though visitors to the *Black Lake* installation would have viewed the films in a darkened room, they would not have been situated in the black box context usually ascribed to cinematic viewership. Many features of the media installation situated the visitor closer to expanded cinema spectatorship, a spatial presentation of art film which is more habituated to the formalist notions of the contemporary art exhibition. Of primary importance to the reception of expanded cinema is the queering of the "frontal mode of presentation associated with cinema auditoria" (Ball 273), drawing the spectator's attention critically to the screens as an interface, which "'matters' for media installation art" (Mondloch 4). This was achieved in the *Black Lake* installation by the existence of two screens instead of the more commonplace one screen. By offering another screen image to follow, even if the two did not differ drastically, the viewer would have been taken out of the immersive technique of the single point of focus, tunnel-vision arrangement of the black box theatre. They were to make sense of both screen texts at once with alternating glances or to choose to concentrate on one with the knowledge that the other was offering a divergent image sequence. In either case, the visitor would have been made aware of the existence of two screens, and thus made aware of their limited viewing of one screen at a time. This

fractured a customary cinematic viewership in which the spectator is “conventionally expected to disregard actual space and time for the duration of the film,” and instead provoked the “viewer to be mindful of the material exhibition space” (Mondloch 64).

Mondloch develops the “here and there” theory pivotal to an understanding of the spatiality of media installations:

By dispersing focus across screen spaces that coexist, and indeed sometimes compete with the actual exhibition space, certain media installations generate a forceful, critical effect that hinges precisely on this tension between illusionist/virtual and material/actual spaces. In a curious amalgamation of gallery-based spatial experimentation and political aesthetics, this model of spectatorship proposes that viewers be both “here” (embodied subjects in the material exhibition space) *and* “there” (observers looking onto screen spaces). (62)

In his text on media art, Michael Newman makes a similar point about the media installation, where the “there” is “the mediation of the image” and the “here” is “the immediacy of the physical experience of the viewer” (109).⁷ Generally, the “there” is the screen space, while the “here” is the space before the screen, which the visitor is aware of their presence in. As Björk leaves the cave (the place of heartbreak) in the film object, the film texts became increasingly brighter as the mood lightens. True to formalism, this had another layer of thematic impact, where the light from the screen began to reveal the intricacy of the cave-like screening room as a parallel space of heartbreak.

The static association of single screen cinema dissolves when the interface becomes a spatial object itself in relation to the rest of the installation. This, coupled with the curious texture of the walls and the potential to explore the sound dimensionality of the room and its various perspectives on the two screens, invited an ambulatory spectatorship of *Black Lake*. There were no seats positioned before the screens to aid comfort in the durational viewing of the film, as are present in many other cases of pure film displayed within a gallery setting.

⁷ Image mediation (or “hypermediacy”) and “immediacy” are the two sides of the so-called “double logic” which forms Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation. Newman’s take on media installation here represents the screen-based moving image medium (film) as present in the installation art medium. Thus, film can be understood as *remediated* for a unique presentational format in the media installation.

Thus, the visitor was encouraged to infer a promenade intake of the room, giving attention to the installation's various features similar to the movement between different works in other rooms of the museum. The potential for mobility in the space was of course presented by its construction, since installation "works [are comprised of] several elements and created in such a way as to be enjoyed through 'immersion'" (Pugliese 23).

According to Newman, the spatiality of the screen(s) in relation to the rest of the material makeup of the media installation "can extend a single shot or sequence into an environment that engages the viewer at a physical level. This can be either immersive or cinematic" (110). The *Black Lake* visitor's engagement was hereby immersive, as they were asked to engage kinesthetically with both the screen as interface and the installation as open space. This kinesthetic engagement took the form of ambulatory interactivity, since – in all installation art – "the visitor chooses a trajectory among all the possibilities," which becomes, for the visitor, "a variable narrative simultaneously embodied and constructed at the level of presentation" (Morse 159-60). The visitor's spatial interaction with the *Black Lake* installation thus became an immersive identification with the screen-mediated virtual space, a personal encounter with the film object.

Spatial made experiential – here and now

Crucial to many of the contemporary art movements since the 1960s – fluxus, performance art, minimalist sculpture – is the engagement of the spectator as an actor in the work's experience rather than simply a viewer of an art object. Installation art, an influential movement in the historical decentering of the object as the work of art, is an obvious case of this, where the spectator is literally positioned amongst the materiality of the work and made to be an actor in it. This immersion activates the visitor as an agent in their own interpretation, as they are responsible for making sense of the piece through spatial relations. Morse clarifies this point: "Note that the artist vacates the scene in installation per se. This allows the visitor rather than the artist to perform the piece. Indeed, she or he is *in* the piece as its experiential subject, not by identification, but in body" (155).

Furthermore, Morse suggests that, since an installation is a temporary set up in a particular gallery space, "installation implies a kind of art that is ephemeral and never to be utterly severed from the subject, time, and place of its enunciation" (154). Art theorist Iolanda Ratti develops the media installation as a special case of installation art where the use of audiovisual equipment would make the film object otherwise technically reproducible. Contrary to this notion of

technical reproducibility, she explains how the conditions of its presentation in the installation vitalize the "*hic et nunc*" (here and now) which is crucial to Walter Benjamin's understanding of a work's aura⁸ in the era of mechanical reproduction. She argues that "the fact that Walter Benjamin placed the emphasis on space and time is very interesting in the case of installations, which are intimately linked to such coordinates" (147). The concept of "here and now" is agreeably made reference to by both Mondloch and Morse in their discussions of installation as work defined, respectively, by experiential encounter (Mondloch 3) and process-based/commodifiable object-debased art (Morse 153). Thus, according to these understandings of media installation art, the visitor's variably expressed (physical, spatial, temporal) presence in experiencing a media installation is key to its very nature as an art text.

Huang, director of the installation's film object, articulates his hope to have "people feel like they're entering this really special, kind of sanctuary-like space to experience this epic heartbreak song" ("Bjork: Making of Black Lake" 11:41). In the film, Björk escapes her heartbreak and enters the brightened world. In the installation, the screen object revealed the screening room as a cave (albeit a manufactured one) from which the visitor could not escape until leaving the installation entirely. Thus, if it was a sanctuary-like space, it was one in which the visitor was suggested to not only consider Björk and Huang's layered (audio-visual) representation of heartbreak, but to also have some ideally cathartic experience of it for themselves. This is a powerful achievement for which most art forms strive: to overcome mere representation by injecting the work with its own original vitality. By finding a way to reach the individual visitor in their experience, *Black Lake* was hereby certainly successful in another of Huang's aims for the project: "ultimately what we hope to do with all of these tools is to make people feel something" ("Bjork: Making of Black Lake" 14:09). Though it is certainly valid for the installation's visitor to have felt a range of emotions in response to the work, it is thus argued that the experience was made to foster empathy in the thematic movement from struggle with a broken heart to a space where it can be mended.

Björk released "Black Lake" as an official music video online on 9 June 2015, announcing her intention on her Facebook page to "make it in a way it was

⁸ Ratti writes that for Benjamin the concept of "aura" signifies the work's value both "in terms of authenticity and authority" (147). It is by this notion of "aura" that Benjamin develops the singularity (and thus autonomy) of a work of art in opposition to the multiplicity (and thus loss of such "aura") suggested by mechanical reproduction and image circulation.

both at home in an exhibition and also in the context of a no nonsense music video (still my fav format)" (*sic*)⁹ ([Björk] 9 June 2015). Though the footage for *Black Lake's* dual screen film object was re-edited into a composite version and released as a music video online, this does not take away from the unique experience of visiting the installation. If anything, its remediation to a web-based format should highlight a certain emptiness without the presentational features with which it was originally conceived as a piece commissioned for the MoMA exhibition. This music video, easily streamable on YouTube, is technically reproducible, not only removed from the unique material features of the installation in which the visitor would have otherwise been immersed, but also the ephemeral presence of the exhibition in which it was embedded. It lacks the here and now of the installation, and thus can never be conditionally experienced, but merely viewed as a fixed text.

According to Mondloch:

Installation artworks are participatory sculptural environments in which the viewer's spatial and temporal experience with the exhibition space and the various objects within it forms part of the work itself. These pieces are meant to be experienced as activated spaces rather than as discrete objects: they are designed to "unfold" during the spectator's experience in time rather than to be known visually all at once. (xiii)

Thus, this "unfolding" in the personal experience of the visitor of a media installation is the real modal level in which the artwork is constituted, and not merely in the various material expressions which allow for its aural, visual, and spatial modalities. It is argued that Björk entrusted this meaning-making labor to the individual visitor of *Black Lake* because all of its expressive levels worked together seamlessly to form a deepened experience of her song.

Conclusion

In order to overcome the challenge of hanging her song "Blake Lake" within the walls of the Museum of Modern Art, Björk and her creative collaborators literally hung the song on the walls around the exhibit visitor. This is taken as a deliberate

⁹ This idiosyncratic style of writing (abbreviation, playful use of language, lowercase stylization, et cetera) is characteristic of Björk's personally released messages. In my opinion, it is not only a byproduct of her otherwise quirky behavior, but also an effort to make her work more accessible and thus immediate to her audience.

concession to the white cube format of the work's gallery modality. The song became visual in the music video process of visualization, with the film's setting extending spatially outward to the sound-mapped felt cone topography, creating a cave-like atmosphere and thus ambient immersion within the song experience. Many critics make reference to the installation's interior design which, according to one "simulate[d] your own presence in the cave" (Lobenfeld §7). This identification between the physical space of the installation's materiality and the virtual space of the film object has been developed as critical to the experience of *Black Lake*. The ability to both distinguish and relate the "here and there" of the installation was dependent, again, on the screen interfaces which simultaneously acted as formalistic indicators of the "here" space and as cinematic windows to the "there" space. Thus, the "here and now" presence within the installation space became a "here and now" identification with Björk's character in the film object.

By way of this text's theoretical discourse, experiencing presence within the immersive spatiality of the room was thereby an embodied identification with the film's visualization of the song. Unlike any experience of a song's audiovisuality before it, Björk beckoned the exhibition visitor to "enter the pain and dance with me" (Björk, "Atom Dance"). *Black Lake* manifested itself physically as a temporary, site-specific invitation to empathize with her heartbreak. Björk and her creative team hung the song on the museum wall, by way of speakers, screens, and felt cones; however, true to installation art's place in contemporary art, the essence of the work did not exist in these material dimensions. Just as the "defining trait of the song is the presence of freezes between the verses – long sustained chords played by strings that resonate in the body of the listener, echoing the emotional and confessional quality of the lyrics" ("Introductory Wall Text" §3), so was the defining trait of its experience, a well-orchestrated sense of "here and now" reverberating in the installation's visitor.

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The Dangers of Soft Power: A Review of the *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* Conference

AMBER WITSENBURG*

The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness, *Conference, University of Amsterdam, 1-2 Oct. 2015.*

On 1 and 2 October 2015, a small-scale conference titled *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* was hosted in Amsterdam. A group of researchers in the emerging field of cuteness studies has recently applied for a research grant from HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) and used this conference as an opportunity to present their work in progress. The different panels were divided into the categories "Gender, Toys, Cuteness," "Cute Affect," and "Machine Cuteness." Even within these categories many topics were covered, which indicates the potential scope of cuteness studies. As I had never heard of this discipline, I decided to attend and find out how cuteness is analysed, why its study is relevant, and what aspects of it could be explored further.

The concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead*. In a later book, he defines it as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, *Soft Power* x). This notion shed new light on the power of aesthetics, of which cuteness is a subcategory. Several scholars have taken up this idea and started investigating in what ways cuteness can, for instance, manipulate people into adopting a certain world view or buying certain products. Examples are: John Morreall, who writes about the way cuteness elicits particular responses in humans, and how this even has survival value; both Ngai and Harris describe cuteness, together with other "low-brow" forms of aesthetics, as a social construct that shapes and is shaped by

* Amber Witsenburg is a research master's student of Literary Studies at VU University Amsterdam.

capitalist society; and Madge looks at cuteness outside of a Western context, retracing how cuteness links to social relations in postwar Japan in particular. In other words, cuteness has already been studied from various angles and in different contexts.

The group of presenters at the conference nicely complemented this research. The opening keynote speaker was Maria Pramaggiore, who discussed the use of soft power by the US military after 9/11. Her talk covered a range of related topics, which were all illustrated by video clips of American soldiers lip syncing to pop songs. She showed how these videos can serve as a counter image to ISIS's videos of executions, so that the US army is presented in a favourable light. However, she also pointed out that the videos frequently exclude women, and they are often based on an appropriation – or even ridiculing – of traditional female fan culture. Although the videos initially seem harmless, they can thus inadvertently promote sexist ideas. Pramaggiore's treatment of her case studies from multiple perspectives was enlightening in a way that was not paralleled during the rest of the first day. Erik Steinskog, who spoke about the gendered marketing of LEGO, remained more descriptive than analytical. Although his elaborate overview of the history of LEGO as well as his personal anecdotes were entertaining, it is no news that toys are usually tailored towards one of two genders. More interesting was Ingeborg Hasselgren's lecture on performative cuteness. She expanded on relational models of cuteness, and posited that a passive relational position, i.e., that of a cute object, image, or subject, can be powerful as well.

This viewpoint was shared by the first two speakers of the next day, Matt Cornell and Nadia de Vries. Cornell spoke about the use of cats in photos by members of ISIS, which formed an interesting juxtaposition with Pramaggiore's earlier lecture on soft power in the US military. He explored the relationship between the cute and the violent, and provided an analysis of the blurring of boundaries between the animal and the human in this context. De Vries addressed the commercial use of cuteness, focusing on the cute aspects of sadness and disability. Amongst her case studies were the musician Lana del Rey, who employs her sad girl image for commercial success, and the popular patchwork dolls, which come to be seen as cute because of their brokenness. The examples these two speakers discussed thus illustrated how cute things can hold power, despite – or perhaps thanks to – being presented as vulnerable.

The final three lectures of the conference centred on machines and robots. All three speakers came to the conclusion that cuteness is employed as a distraction from negative aspects of technology. Julia Leyda focused on gender in

relation to this, noting how female robots in fiction are often sexualised and presented as childlike. Although this type of representation might make these robots seem less threatening, it also objectifies and infantilises women. This indeed deserves pointing out, but unfortunately Leyda remained mostly descriptive. Anthony P. McIntyre spoke about fears people have regarding robots, and in particular about the interrelation between these fears and class distinctions – after all, the upper and middle classes may benefit from advanced technology, whereas many low-wage workers are being replaced by machines. Teresa Heffernan, who delivered the closing keynote, built on this idea. She observed a dangerous development in society in which machines are obtaining a more privileged position than animals and even groups of people. As robots become cuter and more realistic, it is easier for people to project emotions onto them and thus form a bond with them.

As all the speakers illustrated, cuteness studies can offer a meaningful contribution to the field of cultural studies at large, specifically because cuteness can be used as a distraction from developments in society that can be detrimental to groups of people or nonhumans. In other words, several of the case studies presented showed that utilizations of cuteness can sometimes be ethically questionable, which makes a deconstruction of the phenomenon necessary. However, what I missed from the conference was a discussion of the potential benefits of cuteness. As I pointed out earlier, Morreall writes that cuteness can have survival value, which makes it clear that the affect has certain advantages. Although the cute subject is often infantilised and stripped of power and agency, some of the speakers have also suggested that cuteness holds power. How can this power be implemented in a less problematic or even more productive manner? What is more, during the Q and A sessions, the potential therapeutic effects of cuteness were mentioned. To study these would probably require more of a psychological approach, but it appears that this is a worthwhile avenue of exploration within cuteness studies.

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Two Poems

MARTHE VAN BRONKHORST*

I Stood at the Ravine

I stood at the ravine
I looked it in the eyes, it said:
"Hello traveler,
are you afraid of death?"

I thought: Have all my earthy struggles led me here
to die, at last, up in this sacred atmosphere?

The ravine laughed, the clouds started to roll,
the gravel slipped away from underneath my sole

It startled me,
I thought that I had been prepared
I screamed into the depths:
"I am not scared!"

From blinding mist
and ghastly cliffs of pine
"..scared!" it replied.
Its voice sounded like mine.

Ebensee, Austria, august 2015

* Marthe van Bronkhorst is a Psychology student finishing her master's thesis in Sleep Research at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School.

Takabuti Uncovered

My name is Takabuti
In rags my face is hidden
In spells my tomb is written
A secret is my beauty

For my final journey I am well-prepared
With tools and jewels and food all kindly shared
And with infinite scripture to be read
And company – for by my side's my best Bastet

Yet all the wisdom in the world but not a living soul
Has ever solved the greatest riddle of them all
I'm cleansed, I'm loaded but the toll of time
I cannot pay sufficiently with any dime

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Both kings and farmers equal in their fear!

In endless rest and endless rust
Ever dream and ever sleep I must
My pretty eyes closed, humble, is it just?
That I too become ashes to ashes, dust to dust

A poem for Egyptian royal Takabuti, mummified in the Ulster Museum, Belfast, 15
August 2015

The Finale

ANGIE VAN EK*

A paradoxical scene – these four stars,
artificial lights and the curtains drawn
did not mean anything to you.
No words, no words – I pray you.
I do not need them anymore.
No words, no words – I pray you.
your lines are false and careless.

Fare thee well!
Exeunt – you and your shadow.

I cannot even say “How could you?”
I cannot even say “How dare you?”
What *can* I say? Prompter! Line?
Say, “I’m fine.” aside “Alas, I’m breaking!”

Hark now! Anticipation is my worst enemy!
she intoned with a heavy heart.
You are not my morning, nor am I your night.
where is the rain, where is the water?
All the world is waiting – where is the light?

dawn ne’r broke, it could take a thousand years.
dawn ne’r broke, but I did.

And then – end of monologue.
Manent – me, alone.

Adieu, adieu, adieu.

* Angie van Ek is master’s student of VHO Engels at VU University Amsterdam.