Cunning Knowledge and Media Technologies

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The Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris is devoted to the seemingly recondite study of the relation between humans and the natural world, as mediated through the practice of hunting. In a recent exhibition, *Sur la Piste des Vivants* (On the Trail of the Living), a selection of artists were invited to investigate issues surrounding conservation of the forest in the Ardennes region, which is experiencing desertification as a result of the impacts of man-made climate change. Bruno Latour, in his foreword to the exhibition, praises the practices of “tracking”, “capturing”, “trailing”, and “scouring”, which such a project encourages, as a way of breaking down certain barriers between the human and the natural. We are, Latour argues, generally encouraged to survey “nature” from beyond it, to see it as something “out there”, something to which we might have only a glancing, minor form of access. By contrast, “following the animal’s tracks together with the ecologists, farmers and hunters, manifesting their specific ways of viewing the territory, and holding onto it, the artists [give] rise to another perspective on the landscape: not anymore being in front of, but rather within” (Latour, 2017).

In his classic essay *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, Carlo Ginzburg (2013, pp. 87-113) refers to the form of knowledge deriving from tracking and hunting as a “venatic” knowledge. For Ginzburg, it is through the development of hunterly intuition that humans developed the capacity for semiotic manipulations; for Ginzburg “[t]he hunter would have been the first to ‘tell a story’ because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events” (2013, p. 93). For Ginzburg this capacity for metonymy, and for an instinctual, inductive cunning, retains a popular, democratic character, and is a form of knowledge and of reasoning which he ranges against the lumbering idiocies of abstract thought, which he identifies with the state, and with authoritarian power. Ginzburg identifies a breadth of examples of the binary between abstract and venatic knowledge across the breadth of the Western logos, such as between the idealist Realism of Plato and his proto-Fascistic Republic, and the careful attention to symptoms of the celebrated Athenian physician Alcmeon; between the “anthropocentric and anti-anthropomorphic” physics of Galileo, and his contemporary, the physician who “hazarded diagnoses by placing his ear on wheezy chests or by sniffing at feces and tasting urine” (2013, p. 98).

Ginzburg’s analysis can be seen to take up Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant’s (1991) celebrated account of the place of cunning intelligence, or Mētis, in Ancient Greek society. Detienne and Vernant consider the importance of the qualities of induction, speed and resilience, which were so prized as the province of the doctor, the fisherman, the sophist. These are the qualities, of course, which were rejected by Plato and the central tendency of Western metaphysics which followed him. This tradition founded itself upon the stable ground of Reason and rejected the métic as too unreliable, too suspect a foundation upon which to build reliable knowledge about the world or our being within it. This “othering” of the métic under the Western logos has been redressed from a range of positions, in works by Sarah Kofman (1983), Gilbert Simondon (2014; see also Mellamphy, 2015), Donna Haraway (1987), François Jullien (2004), and perhaps most famously in Michel de Certeau’s (1984) rehabilitation of the knowledge and practices of the walker. The
walker, in a technocratic and nihilistic age of the “non-place” (Augé, 2012), ensures that beneath the “discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer” (1984, p. 95).

These classic accounts of the value of cunning point to its utility for negotiating our current situation, of drawing upon and deploying a marginalised folk knowledge, the better to undo the verities and certainties of majoritarian forms of knowledge and domination. The mētic is a form of knowledge which rejects abstraction and detachment and emphasises the ephemeral, the contingent, the capacity to undo and elide the ultimate disclosure, the final revelation. The articles in this special issue seek to explore the contemporary value of cunning as a way of being and knowing the world in an age of technoscience and digital networks. These articles examine the capacity of cunning to offer a way of escaping the grip of technorationalism and hypercapitalist exploitation. The writers examine what it is that separates cunning from other dispositions or ways of comporting oneself and one’s body within contemporary media ecologies and before the technological gaze.

In his contribution to this special issue, *Mētic Action in Digital Culture*, Martin Zeilinger argues for the mētic’s capacity for resistance to the destructive systems of modern globalised capital. Through a critically engaged reading especially of post-autonomist currents of Marxist theories of the technical relation, Zeilinger argues that while there have been committed attempts on the behalf of globalised capital to recuperate the adaptability and resilient aspects of cunning in order to reinforce capital’s own adaptability and resilience, the mētic nevertheless retains the capacity to resist foreclosure and incorporation into the tools of modern technocratic and biopolitical domination. Capitalism has always relied upon the nous of its workers in order to further technical innovation, and Zeilinger argues that it is this reliance which represents an Achilles heel – “In order to remain knowledge (in other words, in order to remain useful to capital), invention-power must inevitably retain some of its autonomy; therefore, it also retains some of its capacity for becoming resistant, mētic action” (p. 19). The mētic’s quality of always “coming to be” means that it resists enclosure or standardisation, such that “[m]ētic action exists in a perpetual state of becoming-resistant. It does not aspire to an ultimate Yes! or No!, but, rather, advances with a Boolean True – therein lies its success: it exists, it works, it struggles, even when it takes one step forward and two steps back” (p. 21).

In "A Way of Life That is Not Entirely Unfortunate": The Peripheral Cunning of Chronic Pain, Vyshali Manivannan explores the embodied realities of the modern subject within a medical sphere predicated upon abstraction. Manivannan gives a compelling account of the significance of cunning as a means of negotiating the anatomo-clinical gaze by sufferers of fibromyalgia, a form of chronic pain which does not “signify” in the way expected of disease. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault (1973) argued that the key question of modern clinical interrogation had shifted from “What is the matter with you” to “Where does it hurt?” (xxvi), reflecting a new understanding of disease as that which can be precisely situated within a body understood as a transparent semantic space. Because the fibromyalgic cannot give any simple answer to this question, “she must employ a multisensory peripheral cunning to intuit sensory expectations of how pain should appear and, accordingly, believably, perform the authentic experience of pain she stands accused of faking” (p. 20).
Manivannan analyses these performances as pointing towards the potential for revealing the arbitrary and reductive spatial bias of modern clinical diagnosis, “[revealing] to the medical gaze how our bodies are physically random and mechanically disordered” (p. 35), and thus pointing towards the potential to develop new ways of understanding and working through pain which “feel and express both pain and numbness with contextual overtones that dissolve binaries like stoic/weak, masculine/feminine, caring/apathetic” (p. 36).

Other contributors to the volume have developed upon de Certeau’s theory of the walker to consider the tactical as a means for negotiating and resisting the demands of digital networks. In Kate Mannell’s contribution, Technology Resistance and de Certeau: Deceptive Texting as a Tactic of Everyday Life, the author explores the significance of ‘butler lies’ – text messages in which the author lies about being indisposed in order to avoid unwanted social contact. Mannell argues that these texting practices constitute a contemporary iteration of de Certeau’s tactics, “a cunning act of resistance” (p. 47) by which to escape the demand of digital networks to be ever present and always available. Through an interview study of young Melbournians, Mannell analyses the butler lie as an aspect of the everyday cunning negotiation of the contemporary media ecology, and a minoritarian form of the disruption of communications logic, noting that “Butler lies, like tactics, are invisible in that they don’t mount a direct attack on mobile technology by resisting or limiting its use. Rather, they leverage the opportunities it affords for easy deception, exploiting its own materiality to momentarily hold at bay the interaction and availability it encourages” (p. 51).

Benjamin Burroughs, in his article Streaming Tactics, likewise affirms the continued relevance of such “everyday” forms of cunning by comparing his own experiences in digital streaming to de Certeau’s walker – the online streamer creates their own “style of use” which challenges established notions of copyright and industry logics of curation. Even as practices of streaming have been recuperated as a now sanctioned practice by platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, Burroughs still finds himself employing non-sanctioned modes of use, “playing the trickster”, “scavenging for passwords, manipulating technology, and leveraging my network connections” (p. 67). While practices of digital content provision have adapted in order to contend with the challenges to spectatorship posed by unauthorised streamers, Burroughs sees this sort of work as retaining a valuable means by which to trouble the “propre” strategies of media companies, the furtive and unstable practices of streamers serving to unsettle the notion of copyright law as natural and timeless (p. 67).

Yet is there a limit to the benefits of cunning knowledge in the face of global threats such as climate change and mass government surveillance which necessitate global solutions and forms of deliberation? Can cunning knowledge “scale up” in an age of digital networks, or does it remain limited to the partial, evasive practices of the individual trickster? In Dazzles, Decoys, and Deities: The Janus Face of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks, Patricia de Vries directs us towards these kinds of questions by positing a sceptical critique of the potential for cunning evasion to constitute a critique of digital surveillance societies. Surveying a series of art works designed to confuse or evade digital surveillance systems, de Vries argues that it is crucial that such evasive tactics do not reassert a simple division between surveilled and surveiller as a “homogenous monolith, and [set] up the human-versus-machine relation as one of opposition” (p. 81). De Vries argues that cunning flight in itself is inadequate as a response to the challenge of digital surveillance networks – what is needed
are artworks which pursue a traversal of the entanglements between surveiller, surveilled, and the broader material infrastructures of contemporary surveillance. De Vries argues for a form of relational critique, which would maintain an immanent and contingent form of analysis, “over and against a binary thinking of neat demarcations and isolated domains, thinking in terms of relations opens pathways to intersectional forms of critique” (p. 83).

Each of this issue’s contributions explore the continued relevance of cunning as a means for negotiating, critiquing, and imagining alternatives to the contemporary technological milieu. They demonstrate the capacity for cunning and the métic to emerge as a way of undoing the abstractions and reifications of technoscientific capitalism and its demands of us as workers, users, and patients, and to reveal alternate paths through a technological landscape which we are within, and not before.

REFERENCES


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This essay explores how métis – understood as the appropriation of dominant power and its inscription in the resistant force of alternative practices – can serve as a framing device for theorising tactical practices of digital culture. Revisiting critical discourses on métis here serves as a framework for arguing that digital practices can simultaneously exist within and without (i.e., against) capital, and as such can become a viable oppositional stance that derives its power from precisely the contradictions that also delineate its limits of criticality. My discussion is linked to theories of appropriation, biopower, the multitude, and cognitive capitalism; my arguments are supported by reference to a series of examples in the form of experimental media art works which, as I argue, inhabit the critical potential of digital métic action.

Introduction

In its multifarious, unstable, forever emergent manifestations, the digital has provided, and continues to provide, myriad new ways of reorganising information, communication, and knowledge, and it puts access to these reorganisation tools in the hands of ever more individuals. For this reason, among others, the digital has been seen to indicate the emergence of a new era (or order?) that holds an immense potential for the disruption and renewal of social, political, and economic systems. As such, the digital was supposed to revolutionise access to knowledge and education, for example, and facilitate micro- and macro-level democratisation of power relations around the globe. But the digital has also provided (and continues to provide) new ways in which capitalism, the dominant oppressive political-economic formation of our time, can reorganise itself in counteraction of the liberatory promises of the digital. Capital has developed multiform alignments along all vectors of the digital and in so doing draws on the very same tools and potentialities otherwise seen to represent the radical, disruptive kernel of new modes of doing, having, saying, being digitally. As Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood write in their 2012 discussion of emergent cloud capitalism: “Escape or capture: the manuals are available to both friends and foes” (p. 40). It has become clear that the digital revolution ensnares us ever more deeply in the logic of various capitalism (“post-industrial” and “post-Fordist,” “financial,” “cognitive,” “informational,” “affective,” and so on). Indeed, capital is so amazingly adept at co-opting and assimilating disruptive elements that some of the most radical characteristics of the digital—such as non-rivalrous reproducibility, knowledge decentralisation, anti-hierarchical data structures, distributed data storage and cloud computing, multi-directional, wireless communication, or participatory communication platforms—are also emerging as some of the most profitable aspects of capitalism today. The commonplace that “there is no outside to capital” would now seem to hold more true than ever, paradoxically at a moment when digital technologies of potentially immense disruptive power are at the fingertips of hundreds of millions. What comes into being here seems reciprocal at best – the opposition begot by digital capital also feeds back into the strength of capital. What, then, of the subversive uses and applications of these powers? What of opposition in
the digital, through the digital, and, by necessity, against the digital?

Marxist economic theory has known capital’s flair for co-option and assimilation from the very beginning. The emergence of the many innovations, technologies, tools, and practices I have here loosely grouped together as “the digital” seemed to mark at least a temporary reprieve from pessimistic views on the individual’s lack of power vis-à-vis capital. But any positive outlook of the supposedly liberatory, democratising, or revolutionary potential of the digital is easy to contradict discursively or by reference to practical or historical example. There is, today, no sustained-and-sustainable perspective on the digital as a condition that might counteract capital effectively. In this essay, I nevertheless speculate on the feasibility of such a perspective. My speculation takes the form of a revisitation of mētis—the notion of an uncontainable, recalcitrant cunning derived from the Ancient Greek myth of the guileful Titaness who defied Zeus. This concept of mētis as the appropriation of dominant power and its inscription in the resistant force of practical skills and wisdom holds, I argue, tools that may help navigate contemporary media theory out of the dead ends into which it often manoeuvres itself. Most importantly, mētis does not offer yes-or-no, black-or-white answers to questions regarding the resistant potential of the digital; instead, it makes it possible to step outside of such polarising rhetoric.

In much existing literature, initial invocation or explicit mention of mētis frequently occurs in the form of a conclusion (often literally in the last chapter, if not last sentence), as an add-on to sinister commentary on the relative futility of digital “resistance” to capital. For example, Keller Easterling’s Extrastatecraft (2014) introduces mētis in the second-to-last paragraph before the Afterword; similarly, Chia and Holt’s Strategy without Design (2009) circles around the concept before delivering it, as a punch line of sorts, at the end of the final chapter, just before a brief Epilogue. In such discussions, mētis appears as an esoteric appendage wriggling its way out of the tail end of protracted discussions to offer a fleeting outlook on a possible solution—a not-very-well-known theory of practice-based, lived opposition to political and economic subjugation. A thorough re-reading of the myth of Mētis must reveal, however, that mētis is never a solution, but rather a beginning and, subsequently, an ongoing becoming. Mētis is not terminal; it is not an end all of digital resistance. It is, by definition, everything but conclusive, and should appear, rather, as it does here (and likely in the other contributions to this special issue), as a starting point. This essay represents, in other words, an attempt to explore how mētis can be usefully deployed as a framing device for theorising contemporary tactical practices of digital culture in and beyond capital. I begin by linking mētic action to contemporary practices of appropriation, which is itself a concept that has always formed both a core process of capitalist accumulation and a primary mode of opposition against capital. This approach allows me to first tie mētis to capital, before attempting to disentangle it from amongst the knotted weavings of digitally-based capitalist enterprise, art practice, and everyday life. Among my core assumptions throughout this essay is that, like appropriation, like the digital, and, indeed, like the general subject of late capitalism, mētis can exist within and without (i.e., against) capital simultaneously—in ouroboric constellations that might be seen as paradoxical, irreconcilable, schizophrenic, impossible. I further assume that if the digital can form a viable oppositional framework vis-à-vis capital, its powers to do so must be located in and derived from precisely the contradictions that also delineate its limits of criticality. It is by following this perspective that I will here attempt to invoke mētic action as a way to recuperate the digital as functioning within and without—and therefore, potentially, also against—capital.

Michel de Certeau, one of a handful of theorists to have written about mētis more extensively, commented usefully on the double-nature of the late capitalist subject, which, he
claimed, can be quite fully assimilated into the capitalist machine while simultaneously possessing practical knowledge useful for undermining capital in various ways (1984). But how can this perspective be thought forward to contexts of digital culture, for example with regard to immaterial labour and knowledge work? Here, contemporary scholarship is far less optimistic about the resistant powers of the subject of digital capital; see Boutang (2011), Coley and Lockwood (2012), already cited above, Fuller and Goffey (2012), or also Easterling (2014). The troublesome line between conformist participation, on the one hand, and cunning, resistant, potentially revolutionary opposition, on the other, surfaces wherever appropriation is deployed in a critical fashion. Any attempt to recuperate the digital for critical, tactical purposes must thus emphasise appropriation, and focus in particular on areas where the line blurs—such as the contested zones in which “knowledge worker” turns into “hacker,” “consumer” into “distributor,” or “user” into “pirate,” often within just a few keystrokes. Below, I consider some concrete examples of this blurring—evidenced, for example, in the “parasitical” financial technologies developed by the Robin Hood Cooperative, or in the art and activism of the Critical Engineering Working Group—and propose that métis provides a useful framework for conceptualising such splits and transitions as dynamic, non-terminal, and open-ended.

The multivalence of the digital as commercial/critical/artistic/revolutionary/etc. appears to be captured quite perfectly in the Ancient Greek myth of the Titaness Métis, whose cunning force Zeus sought to contain by swallowing her alive, but who, even from within Zeus-the-sovereign, yielded an offspring (Athena) who burst forth from the master’s aching head after absorbing the knowledge and skills needed to contest his rule. Métis, in this myth, navigates the tensions between containment and uncontainability—as does, I argue, the concept of appropriation, particularly in its digital manifestations. In the case of the myth of Métis, the primary concern is political dissent. Any discussion of appropriation-based practices, in turn, must inevitably concern challenges to the socio-economic dominance of property regimes. In the context of contemporary digital media landscapes, dominated as they are by informational capital, these concerns are clearly overlapping. After a discussion of the foundational scholarship on métis, I will begin exploring this connection by first revisiting Marx’s theory of appropriation. Then I will push Marcel Detienne & Pierre Vernant’s (1991) anthropological work on cunning intelligence towards the digital by way of a discussion of informal socio-political resistance in de Certeau (1984) and Scott (1998). This will bring my discussion to intertwined, contested notions of the multitude, immaterial labour, and cognitive capitalism, in which the resistant force of biopower has been negotiated, since the early 2000s, with varying (and sadly diminishing) degrees of optimism (cf. Negri and Hardt, 2000, 2004, 2009; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Terranova, 2000). In digital contexts, métis can recuperate and reinvigorate this resistant force, as I will argue and attempt to show through discussion of examples, and through reference to debates that take turns to affirm and contest the theoretical force of métis. When I arrive, ultimately, at discussions of digitally framed métic action in current critical and artistic work, my discussion will attempt to recuperate the critical potential of digital appropriation-based practices through the language of métis. As noted, I will posit the potential of métic action not as an end all of revolutionary resistance (as such, it would inevitably fail); rather, métis will figure in my discussion as an ongoing becoming-recalcitrant, which we might inhabit, digitally, even when contained/bound/caught within capital.

Métis Before Capital
In Greek mythology, *mētis* denotes a cunning intelligence, wit, or trickster wisdom that appropriates knowledge, resources, or technologies from within a dominant context, against which it turns. The first systematic discussion of the concept, offered by the historians and anthropologists Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991), also figures importantly in the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) and the political scientist and comparatist James C. Scott (1998). What these initial applications of the concept share is that they introduce *mētis* as a way forward that is always already immanent in the power relations that are being opposed. *Mētis*, thus, is a concept arising at junctures at which new directions, new approaches, or new perspectives are sought; moments when the independence, autonomy, and even existential integrity of resistant subjects are in crisis. In Greek mythology, the Titan goddess Mētis was Zeus’ first wife. Initially smitten with her guile and wisdom, Zeus soon began to fear her as the embodiment of a free-spirited disobedience that was manifest in her cunning insubordination. Mētis, in turn, came to be associated not only with wise counsel, but also with Promethean, potentially revolutionary tricksterdom. According to the myth, her slyness posed such a substantial threat to Zeus’ sovereign patriarchy that he swallowed her alive, in order to quite literally contain the dissident force she embodied. Detienne and Vernant (1991, p. 305) describe the effect of Zeus’ actions as follows:

> By swallowing the goddess Mētis … Zeus at one stroke eliminated the element of unpredictability and disorder which had previously given rise to revolts and conflicts [and] replaced it with an order which was immutable. Thereafter there would be no more chance ventures or surprises; no more reversals in which the master of bonds could, in turn, find himself bound.

But Mētis had already conceived a child, and the story of how Athena (very fittingly the goddess of wisdom, handicrafts, and warfare) sprung forth from Zeus’s badly aching head is much more popular than that of her cannibalised mother. Based on this myth, then, *mētis* denotes a set of cunning, practical skills that is impossible to contain by dominant forces. Métic action, by extension, has the theoretical power to challenge a dominant system from within. It is important to note that for the most part, Detienne and Vernant set *mētis* apart from *techne*. *Techne* is commonly translated as art, craft, or skill, and is generally considered to be concerned with the analytical, quantitative, and linear approaches of sovereign powers striving toward universality (rather than with approaches resisting these powers). Following Detienne and Vernant, both de Certeau and Scott define the appropriative potential of *mētis* as a cunning intelligence rooted in contextual, heavily localised and specialised practical skills that oppose the empirical knowledge of *techne*. Whereas *techne* is characterised by “impersonal, often quantitative precision and a concern with explanation and verification, … *mētis* is concerned with personal skill, with “touch,” and with practical results” (Scott, 1998, p. 320). Detienne and Vernant (1991, pp. 3-4) too, state that the contexts for *mētis* are “situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic”; situations, in other words, that require the improvisational logic of the tinkerer, and not the rational logic of authority. While classic definitions of *techne* can be useful for initial definitions of métis, it will soon become clear that a strict separation between métis and *techne* is untenable, and that thinking past such a separation is an important condition for deploying both concepts usefully in digital contexts.
**Métis Within Capital**

For now, a clear connection can be drawn between the basic definition offered above, and Michel de Certeau’s work, which employs the story of Métis to outline a series of resistant tactics that relate métic action to everyday life under capitalist rule. Here, the concept serves to describe how consumers and workers might reclaim a sense of agency and autonomy from within dominant socio-economic and political systems. Famously, de Certeau’s argument begins with the question of what the late capitalist subject may be able to create while allegedly doing nothing other than consuming; related to this is the question of what may be in the workers’ power to produce while they outwardly submit to the rules of the work place and the pressure to sell their labour force. In de Certeau’s formulation, the answer to these questions is simple: the capitalist ploy of perpetual and complete domination through the assimilation of labour power suffers from a significant deficiency, because the subject’s instrumentalisation actually serves a double function—not only does it yoke and subjugate the subject, but it simultaneously provides the subjugated subject with access to operative meta-structures underpinning the dominant system. This, according to de Certeau, enables the acquisition of exactly the kind of resistant force that Zeus feared. Métis, in other words, is born of access (or exposure) to techne.

The resourceful workers, whose economic predicaments can also render them keen tinkerers, hackers, or repairmen (in short: masterful appropriators) can now emerge as powerful (if low-level) resistant parameters within exploitative socio-economic systems. For an example, de Certeau points to factory floor workers who, simply by having access to the knowledge, machinery and raw materials necessary to carry out their job, find themselves in a position of theoretical power that allows them to appropriate the resources at their disposal for their own purposes, however modest these may be. More concretely, de Certeau discusses what French workers’ argot called faire de la perruque (“making the wig”). This, he writes, “is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 25). Faire de la perruque is thus the practice of appropriating and repurposing the resources available at a workplace, “work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 25).

James C. Scott (1998) offers a similar definition but pushes the concept to a broader critical and political level when he discusses, for example, work-to-rule strikes, in which employees continue their duties in strict adherence to their work manuals. In doing so they refuse to put to work the métis that can only be acquired on the factory floor—an oppositional tactic disguised as obedience that can massively slow down production processes, generating great financial losses (1998, p. 310). Following such a model, there is no need for industrial sabotage, or for a full-on walkout. On the contrary, here the routines, experience, and practical skills acquired within the dominating setting displays their raw power as métic resistance most effectively when deployed (or withheld) tactically at the workplace itself.

Following Scott’s examples, the split between authoritative schemes of an economic or political order (techne), on the one hand, and the practical knowledge on which these schemes rely, but which they tend to ignore or seek to prohibit (métis), seems clear. But again, it is also clear that during an event such as a work-to-rule strike, métis and techne become folded in upon one another. Scott (1998, p. 310) agrees that the order of officialdom is always related to “informal processes which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist, and which it alone...
cannot create or maintain.” But the critical appropriations he (1998, p. 324) describes as “the recombination of existing elements” can, of course, also overrule and stamp out the criticality of métis through co-option. Métis thus exists not only against or despite techne, but rather also as métis-qua-techne. Any notion of a strict separation between the two concepts must be questioned, an insistence that also emerges, for example, from Sarah Kofman’s (1988) poststructuralist reading of Plato’s differentiations between techne and episteme. Kofman (1988, p. 8) suggests that techne is prominent and indeed indispensable among the “stratagems, expediency, tricks, ruses [and] machinations” devised and implemented whenever métis helps cut through “inextricable bonds.” Métis and techne thus exist in contingent relationships with one another, share characteristics, may, indeed, invoke and function through one another.

These fluctuating, polymorphous connections, which forever enable reinventions of both métis and techne, may also explain why the former, despite its deep association with resistant tactics of dissent, is also sometimes invoked as part of strategies that clearly seem to further empirical, strategic, instrumental goals normally associated with techne. Examples of such seemingly counter-intuitive invocations of métis include corporate strategy manuals (e.g., Chia and Holt 2009, which pulls métis into the context of on-the-fly business decision-making and the collaborative work of software development), or critical texts more ambivalently moving between philosophy, analysis of entrepreneurial innovation, and history of military strategy (e.g., Jullien, 2004, which derives métic business advice from Chinese philosophy and ancient warfare stratagems).

The logic animating the hegemonic projects on which the criticisms of de Certeau and Scott focus is one of control and containment, undertaken for the purpose of more efficient exploitation and value appropriation. As Scott states (1998, p. 335), “the reduction or [...] elimination of métis and the local control it entails are preconditions, in the case of the state, of administrative and fiscal appropriation and, in the case of the large capitalist firm, of worker discipline and profit.” De Certeau (1984), too, notes that post-industrial capitalism relies, to a significant degree, on the worker’s willingness to engage in activities that represent a kind of non-critical métic action, a métis-qua-techne or métis-cum-techne as introduced above. De Certeau (1984, pp. xxiii-xxiv) describes the individual bearer of métis as follows:

Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with [the vast technological and economic frameworks] in which he is incorporated, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover within an electronized and computerized megalopolis the ‘art’ of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days. ... These ways of re-appropriating the product-system, ways created by consumers and workers, have as their goal a therapeutics for deteriorating social relations and make use of techniques of re-employment in which we can recognize the procedures of everyday practices.

But as noted, this kind of re-appropriation goes both ways, and tactical advantages described by de Certeau and Scott also becomes available to capital. If métis, as discussed in the work thus far cited, was to operate in a state of relative autonomy within capitalist ideological structures, a straightforward interpretation would be that Zeus’ drastic measure of swallowing the Titaness (techne attempting to defuse métis) effectively served to strengthen his opponent by placing her in a blindspot of the dominating power. But since the machinations of métis can also serve techne—since the kinds of activities and techniques here described as métic are available, as Keller Easterling
(2014, p. 346) has pointed out, both to the powerful and the weak—this sort of argument is too simple. The interplay between métis and techne becomes much more complicated when keeping in mind, firstly, capital’s proclivity for expanding its reach by assimilating oppositional forces, and, secondly, that the digital, by definition, derives its versatile functionality precisely from how easily it can be recombined, reused, and redeployed across wide-ranging contexts. If skills and knowledge relating to productive use of the digital are bound in the labour-force of the informational worker, then questions of the contingencies of techne and métis inevitably become questions of biopolitics. I will take up this issue of the negotiation of métis in and through biopolitics in the following sections.

Capital and Métic Appropriation

In the Grundrisse, Marx (1973, p. 489) describes the appropriation of resources as “the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature.” Chapter Four of the first volume of Capital specifies that “[t]he simple circulation of commodities—selling in order to buy—is a means of carrying out a purpose unconnected with [the] circulation [of capital], namely the appropriation of use-values” (Marx, 1976, p. 92). Appropriation, which in pre-capitalist contexts may have taken the form of the mere satisfaction of personal needs (appropriating out of the common, as it appears in John Locke’s Two Treatises), thus has undergone a qualitative change once it occurs in the domain of capitalist circulation, where it serves to render profit.

The rendering of profit from commodities exchanged for more than their actual labour-value is no easy task. Marx (1976, p. 106) describes extraction-through-appropriation as one of the biggest talents of the capitalist entrepreneur, who has recognised that “the one commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value” is commodified labour-power, and who knows that its “actual consumption, therefore, is itself ... a creation of value.” It is this appropriative consumption of labour-power that enables the accumulation of capital, by turning what Marx calls unproductive labour (i.e., labour that must be exerted in order to satisfy personal needs) into productive labour that creates value beyond itself. Because the value bound in labour is alienable, the production of surplus-value becomes tied, in Marx’s (1976, p. 305) famous formulation, to “[t]he prolongation of the working-day beyond the point at which the labourer would have produced just an equivalent for the value of his labour-power,” and subsequently to “the appropriation of that surplus-labour by capital.”

Labour, and the values it produces, is a messy affair. It is intimately tied both to the labouring body of the worker and to the worker’s labouring mind. In fact, beyond a certain point at which maximum optimisation of physical labour has been achieved, all increases of value extractable from labour are derived from the skills and abilities—the potentially métic knowledge—the worker embodies. This proposition aligns with the focus, within Marxist theory of the past decades, on immaterial labour (and its appropriation by capital). It also highlights, at least in theory, the potential for appropriation-based activity conducted not by, but against capital. These related issues—regarding the appropriation of immaterial labour, regarding appropriation-against-capital, and regarding the re-appropriation of resistant forces—point again towards the complex interplay between métis and techne in post-industrial, digital capitalism.

If doctrinal Marxist theory of the accumulation of surplus-value primarily draws up scenar-
ios of appropriation at the hand of capital, it also conjures, at least by implication, everyday, artistic, and critical appropriation that turn against capital. Artists and activists have long realised the power of appropriative techniques to elicit socio-political critique, and it is self-evident that appropriation-based creative practices (from Dadaism, Situationism, and experimental “found footage” film to music sampling, video remixes, and digital art that reworks appropriated computer code; I have discussed many of these practices in detail in my PhD thesis—see Zeilinger, 2009) bear great relevance beyond discussions of the purely cultural and aesthetic, and form important critiques of capitalist economies (and the legal and policy apparatuses they have produced). Capital’s talent of appropriating surplus-value from labour, on the one hand, and the artistic talent of appropriating pre-existing, already-authored cultural matter to create new expressions, on the other, are simply two manifestations of a universal, powerful drive to reuse. Different manifestations of appropriation exist in contingent, contested, conflicted relationships with one another; wherever we look, we can see them intrude on the other’s territory, whether for purposes of commercial exploitation or, conversely, for the purpose of critique.

The concept of appropriation thus affirms and undermines seemingly oppositional perspectives simultaneously: while global capital fences in ideas and creative expressions in property regimes, many participants in digital everyday life, such as artists, hackers, and everyday users, thrive on the emerging instability and impermanence of traditional notions of property in digital contexts. For example, digital appropriation as a form of opposition to the notion of intellectual property exists both in contrast to and in reliance upon the belief that immaterial artefacts (commodities, knowledge, creative expressions, etc.) can indeed be owned in the first place. At the same time, notwithstanding this critical dimension of digital appropriation, open source software, characterised as it is by métic procedures of collaboration and collective action that does not aim for profit, has come to represent an extremely profitable domain of digital capital. Again, the dynamic contingencies between métis and techne are obvious. Is appropriation then so deeply embedded within systems of capitalist exchange that it has virtually become one with it? Yes. Does it follow that appropriation is “of capitalism,” and unavailable for oppositional purposes? No. Appropriation, like métis, exists in a dynamic, unstable range between “complicity” and “critique,” and can acknowledge its “inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it” (Hutcheon, 1989, p.25).

At the outset of Grundrisse, Marx (1974, p. 87) writes that “[a]ll production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society. In this sense it is a tautology to say that property (appropriation) is a precondition of production.” It may be that practices of appropriation are now primarily understood through the logic of economic exchanges simply because of the economic stakes that have come to dominate so many appropriative practices. But this simply means that it is becoming more important to consider how we can theorise appropriation within capitalist socio-economic formations without resorting to the dominant economics of property-based discourse. This is precisely where the concept of métis becomes relevant as a way for describing the contestations of capitalist structures that occur through appropriative practices that are themselves heavily relied upon by capital.

The Digital, Immaterial Labour, and the Métis of Knowledge Work

Both de Certeau and Scott argue that métis, as defined by Detienne and Vernant, can withstand assimilation by dominant systems without losing its critical potential. Even when (or: especially
when) métis appears to conform to such a system, it has access to all kinds of vital resources and infrastructures, and can therefore continue to draw power from its position as secondary, assimilated, derivative. Métis is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) called a minor practice. It demonstrates that the systemic limitations that come with socio-economic assimilation can nevertheless enable a becoming of resistance. Metic action, in this sense, utilises key aspects of dominant (re)production and circulation apparatuses and communicates them to others. It knows them “inside-out,” as it were, and enables their appropriation for alternative uses. It represents a resistant potential that is not limited to or by a specific cause or locale. It denotes a more abstract modality of resistance, one that draws on the “plastic, local, and divergent” (Scott, 1998, p. 322) to become flexible and unlocalisable.

The writing of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt is an obvious starting point for connecting métis to the digital. Beginning with Empire (2000), they worked to formulate their vision of a new type of global resistance emerging from new organisations of the immaterial labour exerted by a multitude of knowledge workers in digital economies. In their view, the technological, infrastructural, judicial and social changes attendant to the emergence of contemporary capitalist (re)production circuits have brought with them the foundations of the “multitude,” a shape-shifting biopolitical force capable of what I would describe as large-scale métic action. Negri and Hardt’s thinking extends ideas of autonomist Marxism, which regards “each node [in the circuit of capitalist production as] a potential site of conflict where the productive subjectivities capital requires may contest its imperatives” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 3). Most notably this occurs in acts of appropriation, through which the capitalist subject has the theoretical potential to “refuse to remain labour-power: it resists and re-appropriates” (Dyer-Witherford, 1999, p. 3).

In Marx’ Grundrisse, the concept of general intellect designated a worker’s technological and scientific expertise on which capitalist production depends. The autonomists employed the concept to think labour struggle into the post-Fordist era and beyond the immediate contexts of industrial production. For Negri (2008, p. 11), it is situated “in new labouring subjectivities,” where it takes the form of “the technical, cultural, and linguistic knowledge that makes our high-tech economy possible.” Today, as they produce the informational, cultural, and software-based content of many commodities, immaterial labourers engage in intellectual and communicative activities that may require knowledge in cybernetics, wireless networking, and many types of data manipulation (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 132). The extension of capital’s reach to informational and cognitive activities has resulted in new forms of subjugation, but, I would argue, it also enables new struggles facilitated by métic action that occur within—and simultaneously, as I noted above, “without”—capital. A new power dynamic emerges here, one that proposes that the biopolitical métis of labour power is, as Moté put it, “not only antagonistic to capital but autonomous from [it]” (as cited in Negri, 2008, p. 12).

With this push toward the digital, the theorising of struggles against capital can now extend to subjects whose direct containment within capitalist apparatuses has traditionally been hard to formalise (particularly, in digital contexts, the unsalaried, freelance workers, and others who contribute to production processes outside normative employment relations). Immaterial labour, accordingly, is described as being decoupled from any particular type or class of labourers (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 133-34), and is seen to represent a shared activity “of every productive subject within postindustrial societies” (Terranova, 2000, p. 41). Negri, too, has described the force embodied in immaterial labour as pervading society in its entirety, and points to the “global potentiality which has within it that generalized social knowledge which is now an essential condition of
production” (Negri, 1988, p. 224). When economic production appears as increasingly biopolitical, it becomes “aimed not only at the production of goods, but ultimately at the production of social relationships and social order” (Negri and Hardt, 2004, p. 334).

This notion resonates powerfully with the concept of mētis which, like biopower, forms “a contradictory context of/within life. By its very definition, it represents the extension of the economic and political contradiction over the entire social fabric, but it also represents the emergence of the singularization of resistances that permanently cut across it” (Negri, 2008, p. 18). While material production still “creates the means of social life,” the multitude has the power to create “social life itself” within immaterial production (Negri and Hardt, 2004, p. 146).

Like immaterial labour itself, digital mētis appears as a “problematic ‘other’” in digital economies, a force “that must constantly be controlled and subdued, [that] circumvents or challenges this command,” but that is also subject to the constant threat of co-option (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 65). Informational labourers and knowledge workers form “a disorganized, differential, and powerful multiplicity” that is derived “from the relationship between a constitutive form (that of singularity, of invention, of risk, to which all the transformation of labour … has brought us) and a practice of power (the destructive tendency of value/labour that capital is today obliged to put in effect)” (Negri, 2008, p. 22). Reminiscent of de Certeau’s “practice of everyday life,” the power of this multitude is also like the resistant force of the Titaness swallowed alive by Zeus; it is, “at once, subject and product of collective praxis” (Negri, n.d., §16), embodying an abundance of individual skills and practices that are difficult to assimilate and control.

That capital, through its reliance on immaterial labour, “undermines the basis of its own rule” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 4) is not a universally accepted notion. Working with information may have profoundly social and communicative aspects, but it also subjects the affective dimensions of labour to the powers of protocol and technological modulation (cf. Galloway, 2004). The distributed, networked structures that characterise the work carried out by Negri and Hardt’s multitude may “transform every boundary into a threshold” ripe for creative or activist appropriation (2004, p. 55), but the sinister opposite of this utopian potential is also constantly realised. Coley and Lockwood (2012) describe this as “cloud capitalism,” which excels at co-option no less powerfully than every other form of capitalism before it. Here, “the cooptation of the multitude as multitude, as distributed network of individuals,” appears absolute (Coley & Lockwood, 2012, p. 46). Cloud capitalism is expressed “precisely through the multitude. Consequently, the power of cloud capital lies in the virtuality of the multitude itself, in its potential” (Coley & Lockwood, 2012, p. 46). Information, and the immaterial labour tied to it, appears to be easily captured and appropriated through algorithmic control, closely following Deleuze’s (1992) discussion of modulation in control societies, and in precisely the protocol-based ways described by Galloway and Thacker (2007).

The loss of critical potential attached to immaterial labour and its appropriability not through, but from capital, is best approached through Yann Moulier Boutang’s (2008) concept of cognitive capitalism. This “third kind of capitalism” (Boutang, 2008, p. 9) introduces a key conceptual difference that sets it apart from the related concept of informational capital: for Boutang, contemporary capitalism’s most important innovation is that it no longer simply exploits labour power, but more specifically what Maurizio Lazzarato (2006) has called “invention-power.” This is “the living know-how that cannot be reduced to machines” (Boutang, 2008, p. 32), which cognitive capitalism is interested in valorising in addition to mere information. “Knowledge cannot be reduced to
information”, Boutang (2008, p. 40) states correctly—and with this statement, métis must be reinroduced to the discussion.

Even though the term does not directly appear in Boutang’s writing, its relevance is obvious both in the theoretical discussion of cognitive capitalism and in the practical examples provided to describe its functioning. As Boutang (2008, p. 118) writes:

In cognitive capitalism, in order to be a producer of wealth, living labour must have access to machines (hardware), to software, to networks and to conditions of deployment of its networking activity (environmental conditions in particular). Freedom of access supplants the concept of exclusive ownership. Here production means accessing at the same time, and together, information and knowledge in order to produce other knowledge.

Importantly, knowledge, inflected by the labourer’s individual experience and intelligence, is most valuable to cognitive capitalism (i.e. can be exploited most productively) if it exists as a kind of public good. Cognitive capitalism thus values what above I have described as métis—as long as it can be appropriated in alignment with the preceding discussion on the interplay between métis and techne. In fact, in order to sustain its incredible growth and profitability, cognitive capitalism relies fundamentally and existentially on knowledge and innovativeness that borders on métis. Boutang’s example for how this manifests practically is a discussion of open source software (see Chapter 3). The culture of innovation and knowledge exchange surrounding the production of open source software teeters precariously close to political ideals that fundamentally contradict capitalist property regimes—nevertheless, cognitive capitalism supports and encourages constellations that favour its development. It “becomes absolutely necessary for cognitive capitalism to allow spontaneous cooperation to create itself unhindered” (Boutang, 2008, p. 108)—in other words, cognitive capitalism by necessity facilitates the basis for métis qua-techne that could also become real métic action.

Here, a gap reappears, into which a multitude can sink its teeth. Cognitive capitalism introduces an instability, an “intrinsic factor of uncertainty” (Boutang, 2008, p. 144) into its own operational logic. The fantastical value of knowledge goods relies in part on the fact that they are similar to public goods (knowledge-based, emerging from collaborative and communicative activities, etc.)—both Michel Bauwens (2005) and Coley and Lockwood (2012, p. 53) have observed that here, capitalism operates within the language and conceptual logic of communism, undertaking what might be described as an immensely profitable risk. Again, the image of Mêtis, swallowed alive as a containment measure, springs to mind.

Boutang describes life under cognitive capitalism as life in a “pollen society,” i.e., life in a system that facilitates certain kinds of knowledge and communication systems that will, it is hoped, “pollinate” the economic apparatus with exploitable invention-power. The very language used by Boutang invokes rhizomatic structures and uncontainable behaviours, in short, the biopower of the multitude. It isn’t difficult to think this theory of cognitive capitalism forward towards a critical moment in which the pollen society’s appropriated invention-power becomes proper resistance again, becomes re-appropriated by the knowledge-precariat. To continue Boutang’s own apologetic play on words: such a moment will arrive when that which has previously pollinated begins to stimulate allergic reactions. The potential to produce an allergic reaction in a host system is always already embodied in the pollen-producing being, the pollen-carrying surface, the pollinating event. Following Boutang’s logic, the collective knowledge-power and invention-power that feeds and drives cognitive capitalism could also disrupt it—could erupt from it like a violent sneeze (like Athena
springing from Zeus’ aching forehead). “Knowledge and invention power,” as Boutang (2008, p. 164) writes, will “overflow and leak in all directions.” This is the uncontainable resistance shot of métis pure and simple.

**Whither Métis Without Capital / Whither Capital Without Métis?**

*Métis,* it is my contention, can exist within capital without losing its radical edge. As Boutang and others note, capital, by contrast, can no longer exist without the kernel of what can either become immense value and profit—or opposition, resistance, counter-measure, métis. In order to remain knowledge (in other words, in order to remain useful to capital), invention-power must inevitably retain some of its autonomy; therefore, it also retains some of its capacity for becoming resistant, métic action. Regimes of work may today have transcended traditional notions of workplace and erased leisure; but consequently, the ability to reuse and repurpose technological skills, resources, and information now also invades (and, in turn, transcends) sites of work and production, suffusing all of digital society with abilities to engage in métic action. Capital, by its own operative logic, is forced to “cohabit intimately” with labour power and human productivity (Negri and Hardt, 2004, p. 333). Like Zeus, who swallowed Métis alive, capital swallows human productivity alive, as it were—but in doing so it generates a hard-to-contain, cunning force that is always in the process of becoming and inhabiting its own resistant potential.

If the context for resistance against capitalist enclosures of the production, reproduction, and circulation of commodities and ideas must, unavoidably, be globalisation, and if the biopower contained in the multitude is its driving force, then the most viable mode of engagement is one of re-appropriation based upon the métis acquired within the systems to be opposed. As I argued in this essay, such a definition of critical appropriation as political practice can build on the assimilative powers that capital imposes on its subjects. The concept of métis allows us to think through how the critical momentum of appropriation can not only be retained, but may actually be intensified as a radical mode of engagement.

In lieu of a conclusion, I will offer a few examples of what I perceive to be effective, thought-provoking, productive digital métic action. But presenting these examples bears its difficulties. Métis, as noted, is like *techne,* but it is not *techne*—métic action is a constant of becoming, rather than any kind of terminal solution. It is therefore difficult to determine what might constitute “successful” métic action. I would argue that this difficulty is itself productive, and, in fact, a key characteristic of the kind of uncontainability that métis must strive for. Métis does not yield terminal conclusions; it is a mode of engagement without a predetermined outcome, an inevitable means to an unknown end. It is never-ending, indeterminate, momentary, ambiguous, shape-shifting, dynamic—characteristics that it shares, importantly, with the digital substrates by which it is framed.

Looking around me, I find myself one of countless pollinators in a digital media landscape full of métic expressions (some nascent, some more fully formed) that engage *techne* critically. The media artist Adam Donovan, for example, creates semi-autonomous sonic and kinetic sculptures that explore scientific concepts of psychoacoustics. *Curious Tautophone* (Donovan, 2013) and *Physicophysics Machines* (Donovan, 2013) implement high-precision 3D sound projection that can powerfully alter the viewers’ perception of space. These works pick up and develop cutting edge scientific experimentation in robotics and acoustics. Usually, information regarding this kind of technology, sparse as it is, reaches the public mainly through news about weaponised manifestations,
rather than through media art projects. Donovan’s practice reverses this order (fittingly, a recent photo shows the artist next to a version of a robotic mule originally developed for the U.S. Department of Defense), and performs a métic recuperation in which emerging technologies are transposed from one experimental context (militarisation) to another (media art practice).

The work of Julian Oliver and other artists associated with “critical engineering” practices hit in a similar vein. Oliver’s Transparency Grenade (2012-2014), for example, is a handheld whistle-blowing/leaking device designed to capture, analyse, and broadcast network traffic and audio. The artwork’s shape mimics an iconic Soviet hand grenade to suggest an “explosive” solution to problems with institutional or corporate corruption and lack of transparency. The device itself, by contrast, is fully transparent both physically and technologically, with all specifications and data required to rebuild a transparency grenade freely available online. Point 1 of the “Critical Engineering Manifesto” written by Oliver in collaboration with Gordan Savičić and Danja Vasiliev invites readers to consider “any technology depended upon to be both a challenge and a threat. The greater the dependence on a technology the greater the need to study and expose its inner workings, regardless of ownership or legal provision” (Oliver et al, n.d.). Such formulations are fully aligned with the way in which I have tried to position métis throughout this essay: they don’t propose an end-all solution, nor assume the possibility of a lasting, terminal transformation of techne into métis; rather than proposing an unfeasible revolutionary stance, they emphasise the importance of inhabiting métic action as a becoming-critical, becoming-resistant.

Trevor Paglen and Joseph Appelbaum’s Autonomy Cube (2014-16) is conceptualised very similarly (Paglen, 2014). The sculpture straddles a fluid divide between art, (consumer) technology, and network strategy by creating both a functional Wi-Fi network and a relay for the Tor network, which provides anonymised, secure Internet access. Conceptualised to be set up in a museum or gallery space, Autonomy Cube provides critical commentary on state surveillance strategies and network regulation policy while simultaneously recuperating the technologies on which such strategies and policies rely to form a functional network communication hub, a safe space for users’ online activities, a site of critical reflection. While in this case, the artists do not make design blueprints and building instructions available (their work thus falls short of the more radical approach of the Critical Engineering Working Group), they frame the sculpture with detailed information regarding the Tor network and online anonymity, and encourage viewers to cut through techne by finding other opportunities for taking ownership of the readily available technologies.

My last example is the work of the Robin Hood Cooperative, an “activist hedge fund” that functions as a “counter-investment bank of the precariat” (Virtanen, Nelms & Maurer, 2016). The collective of artists, activists and software developers who form the core of the cooperative began by designing a “parasitical” algorithm that emulates the behaviour of high-speed stock trading algorithms. By analysing market activity and automating the replication of the behaviour of successful traders, the Robin Hood Coop algorithm quite literally appropriates the techne of the financial market for alternative purposes poised against the logic of financial capital. More generally speaking, the cooperative experiments with the creation of financial services and instruments outside the established financial apparatus by implementing useful technologies and knowledge from that very apparatus. As an important side effect, the cooperative produces discourse regarding participatory, commons-based economics that operates, to reuse my earlier expression, within and without capital at the same time.

Many other examples could be given—Ed Atkins’ subversive animations and 3D renderings that bring mainstream video post-production processes into the gallery space (Serpentine Galleries
Sasha Engelmann’s experimental solar-powered auto-levitation devices that represent a “nomadic science” created in collaborations between artists, geographers, sociologists, and engineers (2015); or Henry Warwick’s “personal portable library” (2014), which critiques the corporatisation, propertisation, and control of knowledge at the hands of institutional repositories or commercial media giants, and which proposes a “Radical Tactics of the Offline Library” resonant with the work of the late information activist Aaron Swartz.

As always, there is a constant danger that any such métic experimentation may be co-opted into the institutional or corporate circuits of the vast capitalist machine within which we operate. Current expressions of tendencies can be found in the trend, among tech-focused corporations, to sponsor media art residencies (such as the well-known Pier 9 Artists in Residence program run by Autodesk), or the flood of “labs” at art universities, which, as Jussi Parikka, Ryan Bishop and Kristofer Gansing (2016) recently noted, demonstrate a problematic “convergence of entrepreneurial precarity and a marginalized avant-garde” that displays not only the emergence of cutting-edge artistic practice but which also sheds light on profit-seeking enterprises that share the “expansive research and development (R&D) horizons of advanced art.” Again, appropriation and re-appropriation; meandering between métis and techne.

All of these examples operate at the margins between contemporary art practice and experimental industrial application. Given the uncertainties, complications, and critiques addressed throughout this essay, is there room for métis as a viable concept for resistant practice in digital culture? I believe that there is, and that our ability to conceptualise viable contemporary resistance practices depends precisely on the availability of dynamic, polymorphous concepts such as métis.

“Knowing how to manipulate [media] objects or processes (while knowing yourself to be manipulated or manipulable in turn), as well as the effects or consequences that the trickery or cunning of such manipulation produces, brings into play ... an appreciation of the relative instability of the relations of which such objects, processes, techniques, or technologies are a part” (Fuller and Goffey, 2012, p. 6). De Certeau’s worker, in doing la perruque, has little hope (and, probably, no design) to overthrow management and take possession of the modes of production. Likewise, the hacker who learns, understands (perhaps even designs), and who ultimately improves (or bests) a digital protocol, is unlikely to revolutionise the digital landscape. That is not the point. Métic action exists in a perpetual state of becoming-resistant. It does not aspire to an ultimate Yes! or No!, but, rather, advances with a Boolean True—therein lies its success: it exists, it works, it struggles, even when it takes one step forward and two steps back. Wherever commercial or critical appropriation occurs; wherever late capitalist subjects have turned, by ideological choice or existential necessity, the human capacity to recombine and re-use into an art of survival; wherever artists, activists, tinkerers, and hackers critically redeploy knowledge and skills picked up from a position immanent to capital —métis is a helpful concept for understanding and continuing to develop informal, uncontrollable, tactics of resistance in digital contexts. When engaging in métic action, “you don’t strive for successful result, but successful process” (Jullien, 2004, p.92). This is a useful suggestion. Let us keep in mind also that Jullien offered it in a text that mines the concept of métis for business advice...
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“A Way of Life That is Not Entirely Unfortunate”:
The Peripheral Cunning of Chronic Pain

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Pain, considered an unsharable, interior experience despite its external expressions, is a phenomenon of the visual tradition and tends to be medically assessed visually. Western biomedicine favors brain scans, facial cues, and palpation signals to configure “authentic” pain as visually locatable, confirmable, and eradicable through targeted treatment. However, these ocularcentric medical techniques account only for acute pain, which is temporary and curable, and not chronic pain syndromes like fibromyalgia, an incurable, non-progressive disorder of unknown etiology. The fibromyalgic subject experiences pain everywhere, constantly, such that pain is normalized, infrequently noticed or made noticeable, excepting unpredictable but anticipated flare-ups that are as interruptive and visible as acute pain. Both contradicting and aligning with the biomedical model of acute pain, the fibromyalgic subject obfuscates the medical gaze and is suspected of hypochondria, malingering, or drug addiction. To receive treatment, she must employ a multisensory peripheral cunning to intuit sensory expectations of how pain should appear and, accordingly, believably, perform the authentic experience of pain she stands accused of faking. Relying on métis and kairós to deploy new modes of perceiving, knowing, affecting, and being-affected, she must strategically occupy positions that demand the medical gaze embrace multisensory perception over the solidified distance of image-based instrumental mediation outside of the body.

Introduction

I want to begin with a scream, a real one, that like the agony of abandoned Philoctetes cannot be suppressed or contained, so that you, auditor, in confronting a body unmade by pain, must also confront how modernity has shaped your perception of pain. I won’t lie. I expect you to recoil, and justify your reaction as natural and instinctive, even though revulsion from pain has proved distinctly modern in character, the result of post-anesthetic culture’s insistence on eradicating the sensation of pain, which is the same thing as making the sufferer numb, the suffering quiet, maybe still there (Halttunen, 1993, p. 305). The world tells you to interpret the sound as an acute event of such intensity that it rebuffs analgesic erasure. If you keep listening, I expect discomfort to shut down your empathy, and you to excuse it on the grounds that you are not equipped to intervene in a situation that sounds so intractable. Or, in seeking to help, to understand, or to curb voyeuristic spectatorial sympathy, and because hearing presents the scream as not necessarily compresent with its source, and because vision remains the primary sense by which we think the world, you will want the visual confirmation I am trying to evade (Arnheim, 1969; O’Callaghan, 2008).
Look and you’ll see why. That’s me, post-scream: professor, scholar, writer; inked, pierced, and scarred. I sat silent and stone-faced through four- to six-hour modifications but every morning it takes an hour to prepare my body to stand and meet gravity. My sense of myself is unpredictable and my internal thermostat is permanently broken. If I’m not careful, I weave. I quietly, unwittingly, lived with a ruptured appendix for a month, but I am wary, out of necessity, of every stranger on the subway and every friend’s embrace, every possible bump a potential source of torment that will last for days. I have fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS), an incurable, non-progressive condition of constant chronic myofascial pain of unknown etiology, attended by chronic fatigue, affective dysfunction, and depression. Still considered a wastebasket diagnosis, its primary complaint is “Pain, everywhere,” an answer that baffles the inquiry of the modern clinical gaze, “Where does it hurt?” (Foucault, 1973). Pain fills me. It is not an unexpected intruder but the medium of my existence, monotonous and mundane except for anticipated but unpredictable intensities, a reality that is marginalized by Western biomedicine, which takes as its basis a distinction between acute and chronic pain and a biopolitical subject that can be reconstituted as autonomous, able-bodied, economically viable (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Morris, 1998). In other words, pain that is medically and socially appropriate—acute, curable, and visually accessible through face, gesture, and sound in keeping with bourgeois civility—admits nothing of my experience and understanding of pain, which is endless, incurable, erratic, and non-apparent.

If fibromyalgia is a disorder symptomatic of the contemporary era, as David Morris (1998) has claimed, the need to visibilize it in order to eradicate it is imperative for the State and imperils the fibromyalgic subject, who requires a long-term managed care approach and not high doses of analgesics or antidepressants. This effort begins with visual assessment, as pain is considered a subjective, unshareable experience despite its external expressions and the biomedical conceit that human vision—which affirms aural and tactile assessments—and technical rendering of the body can verify the authenticity, intensity, and location of pain. The logic of modern medicine overlooks that pain is intersubjective, constructed through shared cultural forces and values as well as interior bodily states. It emphasizes pain as a biochemical response and asserts that locating its biological source is paramount to its erasure. By contrast, postmodern pain opposes the biomedical model, insisting that pain is “not a sensation but a perception dependent upon the mind’s ongoing power to make sense of experience” (Morris, 1998, p. 118), exemplified by the daily survival practices of the fibromyalgic subject who must comply with biomedical bourgeois expectations about pain but must remain somewhat elusive to strategically attain increased legitimacy for the disorder as it is experienced and for herself.

To recover what is cunning about fibromyalgia, I intend to trouble the fetish of the visual and the humanitarian sensibility surrounding it, which deems pain eradicable and therefore unacceptable, and, consequently, its expressions titillating, obscene, and barbaric (Halttunen, 1995). I open with a scream to unsettle sight as the primary sense modality by which the body in crisis is perceived, and to unmask anesthesia as a temporary state of relief, an obeisance to the State’s project of biopolitical productivity, only for acute pain. In this paper, I will first provide an account of pain as intersubjective, bounded in its expressions by bourgeois norms of civility and propriety, and, as Morris (1998) suggests, more biocultural than biomedical. Subsequently, I will discuss the primacy of vision in the medical assessment of fibromyalgia, which also determines its legitimacy. Finally, I will articulate the mētis and kairós of fibromyalgia, which extends Tobin Siebers’ (2004) notion of
disability masquerade—whereby the disabled subject “passes” by exaggerating the stigmatized identity—exaggerating an identity that commingles the stigmatized expectation with artifices keyed to making invisible processes apparent, to foreground them as the chief (if nomadic) manifestations of pain. I will explore how fascia, a peripheral organ in modern anatomy texts and invisible to the medical gaze, becomes the site of bodily intuition with a complex power to cunningly afflict, relieve, transform, disguise, and navigate. By doing so, I hope to account for some of the ways fibromyalgia may be construed as a physiological expression of disciplinarity, as well as “a corporeal resistance to harmful labor practices” (Alaimo, 2012, p. 31), and in terms of the social distance on which eighteenth-century spectatorial sympathy is predicated. Pain is a biochemical response and a discursively constructed social phenomenon intricately bound up with power. It is immovable but neither monolithic nor useless. Ultimately, I hope to address the provocation Morris (1991, p. 175) raises in his study of pain: “We use pain almost as regularly—and sometimes as cunningly—as pain uses us. The hope lies in learning how to use it to better purpose.”

Stare at Pain, and Pain Stares Back

To understand the perception of fibromyalgia, we must look to cultural understandings of pain. As an experience, pain is a universal quality of the human condition even if it differs in its manifestations, expressions, and meanings. Elaine Scarry (1985) observed in her seminal work on physical pain that it is a personal, private, inarticulate interior state that lacks referential content, easily grasped by the sufferer but inaccessible to sensory confirmation by spectators (p. 4). However, this glosses over its fundamentally intersubjective nature, as pain is historically contingent and cannot be divorced from the interpretations placed on it with other people in specific social contexts. Thus, pain is not solely a biochemical problem but one shaped by cultural forces like gender, race, sexual orientation, and emotional well-being—thus, a biocultural problem (Morris, 1998). As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 77) observed, the subject’s ordering of stimuli, and not the stimuli themselves, determine the subject’s perception of sensation, a conception of the body that is comprehensible only if we conceive of it as an embodied entity interfacing with the world through embodiment. For instance, the hermeneutic standards of prehistoric society attributed a headache to the crisis of demonic possession, while the same headache today is a trivial biological fact, easily cured with Advil (Morris, 1991).

It was the search for effective anesthesia in the eighteenth century, coupled with a growing middle-class sensitivity to pain, that began constructing pain as taboo, curable, and best handled from a distance. According to Karen Halttunen (1995), modern attitudes and emotional orientations towards pain can be traced to the emergence of a humanitarian sensibility in the eighteenth century that revolutionized the meaning of pain. Pre-modern, pre-anesthetic cultures recognized pain as inescapable and responded to it with an often religious acceptance (Halttunen, 1995, p. 304). After the reformation of values around pain, disciplinarity led to the privatization of pain, relegating it to institutions of deviance like the asylum and penitentiary (Foucault, 1975). Spectatorial sympathy—the act of witnessing pain, imagining yourself in similar straits, and bodily assuming the sensory torments of the sufferer—was necessarily recast from sentimentalism to a prescribed social and biological distance from the sufferer: in other words, viewing suffering from a careful distance allows us to set a value on our own condition, but in viewing immediate pain you risk absorbing it, making it dangerous in addition to being distasteful (Halttunen, 1995, pp. 307-8).
If I were to create a public spectacle of immediate pain, then I would appear to shamelessly want the prurient gaze and to wantonly, perversely, retain pain instead of numbing it. “Making a scene” through an intense response to nonsevere sensations, like being jostled on the street, signals hysterical or hypochondriac attention-seeking behavior. Additionally, stoicism was cast as an upper-class quality, while being the object of empathy was lower-class, an intra-class language that mandated rigid self-control in public. This coupled with the critique of the infliction of public pain made physicians more sensitive to causing pain in their patients, reflecting and reinforcing the new cultural dread of pain (Halttunen, 1995, p. 310). The sufferer of incurable, long-term pain—whether she “makes a scene” or reveals nothing—is framed as biologically, culturally, and socially dysfunctional: helpless, pitiable from a distance, sadomasochistic close-up, a disempowered nonelite if she makes her pain known. The modern-day legacy of anesthesia and the humanitarian sensibility, thus, is threefold: a revulsion to intense expressions of pain; a skepticism concerning intense expressions over pain that is not life-threatening; and the cultural pressure to keep pain hidden and, in settings like the clinic where its expression is appropriate, to reveal it tastefully.

Modern understandings of chronic pain emerged in these contexts, despite a history stretching back to Galen’s identification of a diffuse pain condition called *rheuma*. In 1904, Sir William Gowers coined the more resilient term *fibrositis*, and in 1972, Hugh Smythe cataloged its symptoms, including constant, systemic pain and “trigger points,” sites of focal tenderness. This definition evolved in the 1970s, when the name was changed to *fibromyalgia* to describe any widespread, idiopathic musculoskeletal pain of unknown etiology, and diagnostic criteria were refined to normal lab results, the presence of 12 out of 14 trigger points under 4kg of manual pressure, and a history of systemic pain and disturbed sleep. Muhammad Yunus (1981) conducted the first controlled clinical study that supported these symptoms with data. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, fibromyalgia evolved as a rheumatological, autoimmune, nervous system, autonomic function, and/or affective disorder with potential links to other conditions, including psychiatric issues when serotonergic drugs proved effective and emotional traumas were considered causative as well as comorbid (Inanici and Yunus, 2004; Brennan, 2004). During these past 30 years of development, the contemporary medical community has intensely debated the ontology of fibromyalgia. Although the FDA approval of Lyrica in 2007 for the specific treatment of fibromyalgia lent it credibility, its legitimacy remains highly contested (Graham, 2009). Fred Wolfe (2000; 2009) recognizes that the condition exists but discredits the diagnosis as a socially constructed means to medicalize ordinary, universal states of bodily discomfort to serve the interests of pharmaceutical companies. Additionally, Manfred Harth and Warren Nielsen (2007) question the legitimacy of the trigger point diagnosis given that the minimum number of points for diagnosis is arbitrary and control points also cause pain.

In short, fibromyalgia remains a wastebasket diagnosis for when no one knows what is wrong, and, I would add, even that granted only when it is visible enough to warrant medical attention. This classification is furthered by the biomedical view that pain serves as the body’s alarm system, as well as the cultural rhetoric of conquest in which pain is a sensation to be bested. By contrast, Morris’ (1998) biocultural approach accepts that incurable, chronic pain no longer signifies. When acute pain sounds the alarm in the normate subject, it signals danger to the body, a pressing need for evasive action, before which all other actions pale. By contrast, chronic pain is a continuous
relay of signals that does not signify danger or urgency, although the biomedical view interprets it within the framework of acute pain. I have learned the hard way that chronic pain is a call with no answer, not a biological emergency necessitating medical attention, but sensations to which I ascribe sociocultural, historical, and political meaning. Cultural views of pain and pain perception are entangled with fibromyalgia, which is thought to be exacerbated by nonbiological contributing factors like work-related stress, trauma, financial hardship, interpersonal conflict, or political crisis (Morris, 1998).

A biocultural model of pain considers factors such as those delineated above to offer a model of pain that cannot be private and unsharable, that is historically contingent and intersubjectively constituted at specific cultural moments. The rise in chronic pain not only shapes and defines the postmodern condition but also highlights the problems of contemporary medicine: the blurring of acute and chronic pain, failures to appropriately interpret and classify pain, and the implicit quest for perfection, which must end with a vision of recovery, and which reflects poorly on the physician if it does not (Morris, 1991). By recognizing that there are limitations to standardizing chronic pain solely by medical standards, and by acknowledging that fibromyalgia is intersubjectively constituted in a network of pained and non-pained bodies, we can start to dissolve the fixed distinctions between them and complicate discourses that frame fibromyalgia as isolating, invisible, and therefore unknowable and always suspect.

Seeing Is Believing—But Shouldn’t Be

Despite the apparent effects of culture on sensory perception, the biomedical model implicitly accepts that a seronegative pathology like fibromyalgia can only be diagnosed based on visual assessment. Philosophies of perception recognize that vision dominates how we think about perception, and ocularcentrism is a fact of life in many societies. Rudolf Arnheim (1969) conceives of “visual thinking” in restoring the activity of the senses to the definition of cognition, calling vision paramount in the hierarchy of the senses because it can offer varied data through which to order our world. It may confirm the sensory reality of non-visual modalities, such as a breeze and the fluttering of pages, or a moving mouth and speech. Thus, Arnheim (1969, p. 40) finds visual perception most intelligent, as when the eyes wrestle with a scene by actively scanning, determining, and culling, and not just passively recording sensory stimuli.

Since the 1800s, visualization techniques have been critical to power-knowledge in medical practice (Rose, 2007, p. 14). After the advent of the humanitarian sensibility, Western medical practice was undergoing a revolution in ways of “seeing” and “knowing” the body. Illustration of the diseased body involved an assemblage of actors—physicians, surgeons, artists, and publishers—working closely to represent pathology in the dead. The use of these images in anatomical texts in medical pedagogy indicates their evidential status, despite their also being aesthetically and culturally value-laden. As Johanna Drucker (2010, p. 6, 13) observes about the use of objective images in scientific development, the subjective perception of the viewer is encoded into the production of all images, aesthetic or quantitative, and the act of interpretation is always stamped with subjectivity.

The adoption of mechanical techniques, ranging from Gray’s Anatomy’s lithographies and woodcuts to photographs, further altered the landscape of medical representation. Artists could
foreground or deemphasize parts of interest in the body, whereas the photograph was thought to give equal emphasis to everything in its frame. Although spirit photographs and the like cast suspicion on the neutrality of the photographic images, their alleged impartiality lent itself to an aura of objectivity. Furthermore, photography permitted the mass production of images for indexes and anatomical texts, facilitating the enterprise of collective empiricism and linking the disciplinary medical gaze to a particular form of representation of the dissected body. Their pedagogical use ensured a shared community of principle and practice that standardized methods of observing, comprehending, and treating the diseased body (Barnett, 2014, pp. 20-34; Daston and Galison, 1992). Significantly, in privileging allegedly objective images of the dead patient, biomedical authority was exercising state power over an inarticulate, frequently lower-class corpse, thereby anchoring clinical authority in images of the dead body rather than the living voice.

According to John Tagg (1988, p. 63), the status of photography as a technology varies with the forms of power that invest it. Photography was a key technology of power-knowledge from the 1870s onward in institutions like the hospital that used documentary images to order the conduct of social life. Medical photographs of living patients enacted the intimate observation and subtle control of Foucault’s (1975) disciplinary power, and continued to substitute for the patient’s voice. Medical photographs were imbricated with contemporary ideologies and preceding art forms, drawing on the codes of the selfsame portraiture and anatomical illustrations they were intended to surpass. Photography was meant to procure with “unerring accuracy the external phenomena of each passion, as the really certain indications of internal derangement” (Tagg, 1988, p. 78) in its physiognomic representations of inmates of the clinic and the asylum. Thus, medical photography linked external manifestations, identifiable with the objective camera’s eye, and therefore the human eye behind it, with internal disorders like insanity and syphilis.

With advances in imaging technologies, the camera eye acquired the capacity to broach the body’s boundaries before postmortem autopsy. The clinical gaze, which Foucault (1973) acknowledges as imbued with multisensory perception, possessed unrivaled authority after the patient died and was dissected. However, as Donna Haraway (1988, p. 581) observes, disembodiment, which has historical ties to male supremacy and the masculine pursuit of scientific objectivity, is compounded by the mediation of this gaze: visual systems that organize bodily substrates, account for and generalize about pathology, and legitimize conjectures about the subject’s future health. In opposition to the Western biomedical narrative about objectivity, the medical gaze is only a partial, situated perspective, and the feminist cunning promoted by Haraway recognizes it as “a god trick”—an illusion that promises to transcend all limits, up to and including the invisible interior substances of life. In a sense, the legitimating power of the gaze is transferred from the moment of dissection to the machine-rendered virtual autopsy, which addresses vision alone. Haraway’s (1988, p. 581) feminist objectivity recognizes all vision as embodied, including technological mediation from the medical photograph to internal scoping procedures, diagnostic imaging, microscopes, and enhancement techniques. Although Foucault (1973, p. 164) acknowledges this embodiment of vision in the sensorial triangulation acquired by the clinical gaze, he also suggests that the disembodiment of vision was a necessary moral move, as “instrumental mediation outside the body authorizes a withdrawal that measures the moral distance involved.” If the cult of sensibility found pain shameful, the postmortem fact of the body’s innards was even more so, and airing that secret prior to death similarly prurient. Diagnostic imaging technologies create a solidified distance
between physician and patient, preserving a veneer of respectability by separating the patient in her state of shameful transparency from the physician's spectatorial appraisal of the most private of bodily depths.

Technical rendering procedures reify the dominance of the visible by limiting the medical gaze—which once embraced more than sight alone—to the realm of everyday vision and the virtual projection of the invisible. As Foucault (1973, p. 165) suggests, auxiliary senses became legitimate methods of inquiry only because they anticipate the visible qualities of the postmortem autopsy. Thus, the multisensory approach remains yoked to the fetish of the visual, with the eyes predominating over perceptual modes that assail the senses only when the body is opened and the invisible made visible. Furthermore, advances in biomedical technology have compounded the sense that the questions to be asked and knowledge to be gained about any given body are innumerable, potentially unnecessary, and tedious. Limiting observation to the intersection of human and technological gazes and patient discourse aligns with a pattern of study in which disease, and especially commonplace events like a headache or a ruptured appendix, is repetitive and recognizable in its repetition (Foucault, 1973, p. 110). Disembodied as it is, the contemporary medical gaze is able to visually isolate systems and sites of interest in the interior organic body through ultrasounds, CAT scans, EEGs, MRIs, and so on. Digital simulation is central to these visualization techniques (Rose, 2007, p. 14). Joseph Dumit (2004) notes that the cultural and visual logics of the digital diagnostic image align personhood with the technologically rendered interior. Thus, if the machine is unable to capture a picture of pain, such as inflammation or injury, it is as though the disorder does not exist. Isabelle Baszanger (1998, pp. 148-149) observes that clinical treatment of pain should draw on diversified knowledge, but patients’ words are merely an indication. If it is through “the regular alternation of speech and gaze [that] the disease gradually declares its truth” (Foucault, 1973, p. 112), the patient who complains of distress with no visible symptoms is automatically unreliable, especially in the contemporary biomedical complex where malingering for welfare is a common accusation.

Techniques expected to be more objective, thorough, and knowledgeable about the body take precedence over patient articulations. The detached, scripted, and asymmetrical clinical gaze of medical diagnosis seldom encompasses the whole body but rather the parts where symptoms are expected to appear, in keeping with “the god trick” of Western cultural narratives of objectivity (Foucault, 1973; Haraway, 1988).

The implicit problem here becomes how machine detection and rendering orders the diagnosis, legitimacy, and treatment of fibromyalgia. In this case it is through confirmation of the 18 trigger points “legitimated” by the patient’s visible expressions, like a grimace or flinch, on being palpated there—an initial diagnostic measure that employs the sensorial triangulation of sight and tactility. In Emma Whelan’s (2009, p. 171) study of pain scale standardization, she argues that, since vision is a selective sense, what it privileges about the pained body is how that body becomes classified and ordered as a result of technical interventions in an attempt to “make pains the same.” Accordingly, popular classification systems privilege the location of pain and visual assessment of the patient’s reaction to being palpated there over other cues such as vocalization. Additionally, the proprietal gaze of interpreters like radiologists prevents the patient from fully accessing intimate information about their bodies, exacerbating the experience of dispossession and radical self-estrangement.
Technical rendering and clinical ownership reinforce the invisibility of fibromyalgia by emphasizing the visibility of the external and internal body, celebrating the triumph of the ocular gaze over the perceptual experience of ear and hand, and substituting partial data for the whole patient (Alaimo, 2012; Dumit, 2004; Foucault, 1973). This is a medical gaze based not on multisensory perceptual experience and analysis but on recognition of a pattern, the picture meant to apportion the visible within the conceptual configuration of the body (Foucault, 1973, p. 113). In a stark departure from sensorial triangulation, the image is absorbed into a complex of practices that seek to generalize about conditions, like fibromyalgia, that tend to differ across individual bodies.

When pain is chronic it becomes so ordinary it ceases to signify. Even with its nomadic irruptions, I have habituated a face that aligns with the cult of sensibility to fit into public society, assuming that my physicians will take my words alone as an indication, instead of pinning their hopes on a visible sign or blaming me for being so foolhardy I ignore what pain is “telling” me, when I know it is telling me nothing. Too much expression, and I transgress against the legacy of the humanitarian sensibility; but without visible expression, I am numb, a gender-marked sensation interpreted as—in keeping with both female hysteria and post-anesthetic culture—the inability to feel instead of a detachment caused by repeatedly being denied the ability to feel (Morris, 1991, pp. 118-124). Confronted with this sensibility and sensory hierarchy in the clinical settings where she seeks help, the fibromyalgia sufferer has little recourse but some form of masquerade. Cunning intelligence allows the patient to use masquerade to destabilize not only the sensory hierarchy but also the biomedical model of pain, to trouble what physicians have habituated about visual assessment and the evidential nature of photography, and restore her ability to express pain without foreclosing empathy in the face of the middle-class dread of pain.

How to Win Even With Mediocre Horses

The ancient Greeks held a special reverence for cunning intelligence, mythologizing it from its namesake Metis to figures officially sanctioned by the heavens, like Hermes, Athena, and Odysseus, and to those who used their métis to outwit Power, like Prometheus and Sisyphus, both of whom were punished by the gods for their actions. The distinction between those with and without métis is significant. Those lacking métis are witless, ritually circumscribed in time or space, and ultimately supportive of the status quo. By contrast, météter tricksters are agents of fundamental change, occupying strategic positions to detect the way out from impossible situations (Detienne and Vernant, 1991, p. 144). Whether confronted with ancient gods or the medical gaze, the challenger must possess métis to outwit an all-seeing, all-knowing Power, using creativity, craftiness, fluidity, and opportune timing, or kairós, to successfully navigate an inconstant, endlessly changing landscape and enable futures of becoming.

In their landmark study of métis, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991) deconstruct the role of cunning in 4th century Greek culture, indicating that métis is the only response to powers that bind or capture. The goddess Metis represents crafty wisdom, cunning perception, and technical skill. She is responsible for the deception that caused Kronos to regurgitate his children; her counsel guided the Olympians to victory during the ensuing Titanomachy. Hers is the only mind eternally aware of “all the possible vicissitudes of becoming” (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, p.
This mētis is diverse, polymorphic, and fertilely inventive. It is the cuttlefish’s impenetrable ink cloud, the pilot’s alert adaptability in inclement weather, the blacksmith’s technical knowledge, and the warrior’s stratagems. It manifests in the fox and the octopus, which rely on dissimulation, camouflage, elusiveness, and unpredictable reversals to find sustenance and evade capture (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, pp. 33-5). In short, it is a fast-moving, adaptable, polymorphous, and many-faceted artificer, characterized by dissimulation, a mastery of finesse and cunning tricks, and a knack for perceiving and exploiting opportunities and paths of egress in seemingly uncrossable territory, visible only to mētis (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, p. 19, 43, 147-8).

The semantic field of mētis also contains kairós as the propitious moment for action and metanoia, afterthought, a feeling-state in which reflection, revelation, and transformation influence decision-making in the kairotic encounter (Hawhee, 2004; Myers, 2011). Unlike linear chrónos time, kairós regards the present as an unprecedented moment of potential crisis, resolvable only by collapsing all present possibilities into a single, incisive decision (Hawhee, 2002, p. 25). Kairós collapses mētis and phrónesis, or practical knowledge that indicates the most appropriate course of action, into a temporal ontology where “propriety of time” intersects with “the ability to say the fitting thing at the opportune moment” (Sullivan, 1992, p. 318). Inseparable from the kairotic decision, metanoia is the affective moment of being unprepared for opportunity, including states like regret, repentance, and guilt. If the kairotic moment forecloses advantageous opportunities, metanoia is established; if new opportunities appear, metanoia is denied (Myers, 2011, p. 10). While metanoia that is too strong may stymie future action and transformation, it serves as a painful learning process that may incentivize individuals to be better prepared for future kairotic encounters. Additionally, as Antonio Negri (2003, p. 212, 248) asserts, kairós is irreducible to the clock-time of capitalist productivity, suggesting it is ripe for creating meaningful social bonds and overcoming oppression. The kairotic decision, essentially, is the power to innovate on the temporal edge of being as opportune biopolitical resistance. Faced with the seemingly uncrossable territory set for her by the medical gaze, the fibromyalgic trickster must empower herself by intuiting kairós, harnessing mētis, and enacting phrónesis in an attempt to radically transform the grammar of a form of life.

Phrónesis, according to Paolo Virno (2008), is the practical action of mētis, comprising the “knowing when” and “knowing how” that results from the pedagogical influence of metanoia. Importantly, unlike other sets of practical knowledge, phrónesis selects a behavior based not on dominant social values but on what is most appropriate to the situation at hand, using mētis and kairós to do so, in an attempt to change the epistemological grounds that inform predominant norms and values (Virno, 2008, pp. 90-97). The fibromyalgic who has habituated mētis may resist the medical classification of musculoskeletal disorder by intuiting and visibly articulating pain vectors that lead the assessor to focus on other implicated organ systems, particularly fascia, which requires senses other than vision to be perceived. This action, like those of the ancient tricksters, seeks to disturb the sensory hierarchy and web of signification that structure the physician’s assessment criteria; once the web of signification is divested of its allure, its terms become contingent and revisable, repudiating the fixed end to meanings that is vital to techniques of quantification and massification in favor of stochastic knowledge (Hyde, 2010; Sullivan, 1992).

Most significantly, as it derives from “an unmanly deity,” mētis is possessed of feminine qualities like prudence and empathy, as Leopoldina Fortunati (2016, n.p.) points out. The gendered
dimension of this cunning, which may be more accessible to women due to the nature of gendered labor divisions, is absent in accounts of wily tricksters like Odysseus—who, significantly, abandoned his wounded comrade Philoctetes because witnessing his pain proved intolerable. The labor of care has been historically placed in the feminine sphere and with it, by extension, a tolerance and empathy for the objects of care, such as those in pain. Challenging patriarchal accounts of métis as masculine cunning recovers a particular form of female cunning, insight and foresight and imaginative creativity that has been censored, in myth and the social order, to consolidate a paternal law contingent on matricide. Metis is disempowered and oppressed through patriarchal consumption, and the cerebral parthenogenesis of her progeny Athena by Zeus strips métis of the essential female creative act of bodily birth, and hence of bodily intuition (Jacobs, 2010). This distinctly female métis parallels the peripheral intelligence intrinsic to the daily survival of the fibromyalgic woman. It may explain how (feminine) persistence, tenacity, adaptability, and patience outwits (masculine) domination in the medical industry, and makes itself available outside of “feminine culture” through a process of habituation that does not dismiss, engulf, or otherwise minimize its matriarchal influence.

Slipping the Trap of the Biomedical Gaze

The dimension of embodiment is often overlooked in the doctor’s office unless it is visible, but the ontology of fibromyalgia with its non-apparent pain is one of perpetual becoming through corporeal disruption, mandating new forms of attention to others and self that are kairotic, phronetic, and empathic in nature. The management of continuous corporeal disruption speaks to our preconscious capacities for posture and movement, as demonstrated by Steve Paxton’s “small dance,” the incessant and creative “adjustment of orientation, alignments, contractions, relaxations, and balancing” (Dumit and O’Connor, 2016, p. 35). Métis provides a framework by which to understand how the fibromyalgic subject plays with the small dance to comply with the sensory expectations of biomedicine and the humanitarian sensibility to merit treatment while cunningly, simultaneously, occupying the position of the polymorphic “third thing” that exceeds biomedical classification and reorganizes the sensory hierarchy by demanding alternate modes of assessment, ultimately challenging the massified practices of chronic pain treatment.

Siebers (2004) reflects on how public claims to disability must be supported by visual evidence, like a wheelchair, disfigurement, or obvious bodily incapacity. He acknowledges that disability passing, or concealing the disability to appear normate, effectively points to disability identity as one that no one would voluntarily want to assume. It preserves social hierarchies by presuming that disability is lower-class and that disabled individuals desire to rise to the top of the hierarchy, the normative, elite, dominant social group. At the same time, he offers a tricky “third thing,” a strategic, fluid position that defies easy categorization: the disability masquerade, “an alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior” (Siebers, 2004, p. 5). Significantly, disability masquerade may inflect private and public space for political ends, to expose false presumptions or make strategic use of them, and to tinker with the social meaning of the particular disability, and disability as a whole (Siebers, 2004, pp. 9-13). Unlike passing, the masquerade makes disability “overvisible,” performing or exaggerating
stigmatizing difference to expose and resist social prejudices, such as a misapplied or absent prosthetic, or an exaggerated limp (Siebers, 2004, p. 19).

Largely non-apparent except during flare-ups of acute intensity, fibromyalgia already passes. Purposefully performing it as disability masquerade merely displays an experience of acute pain. Rather, the fibromyalgic patient must visibly display different experiences of chronic pain in different locations, along the meridians of its referrals, to temporarily confuse the biomedical and cultural norms defining pain: namely, that pain must signal bodily crisis, that it must be visible (but not alienatingly so) to be real, and that it must comply with bourgeois taste and decency. As with minority groups, “overvisible” fibromyalgia subverts hegemonic social conventions by resisting social pressures to embrace the humanitarian sensibility—to hide pain, to designate its public expressions shameful and stigmatizing, to keep it at arm’s length. Fibromyalgia masquerade is visible but only as “civilized” as it must be to keep the physician engaged in the quest for personalized treatment. It is a composite performance intended to appear contradictory and surprising to create the conditions for kairotic transformation, such as costuming to appear able-bodied and expressing pain in posture, gesture, facial expression, and vocalization in close public spaces like an escalator or subway car, or requesting unexpected assistance such as a stool to rest on in a grocery store.

Where disability masquerade readily calls attention to the disabled organ, fibromyalgia takes the whole body as the disabled organ, and must enact masquerade in a way that insists to modern medicine and society that the entire body is afflicted. As such, fibromyalgia masquerade centralizes fascia, the lubricating and supporting membrane that envelopes and interpenetrates the whole body, an “active, intelligent, communicative, and sensory organ; sometimes three, sometimes many and sometimes one, liquid, solid, and mucus” (Dumit and O’Connor, 2016, p. 36). Fascia is the only whole-body organ, and may be critical to managing fibromyalgia but invisible to biomedicine. The mechanical techniques in Gray’s Anatomy captured fascia as a prominent organ, but modern-day clinical textbooks and pedagogy present fascia as an organ to be cut through, a barrier between the surgeon and the treatable body, and not a treatable organ in its own right. While it is enjoying increased attention, until recently fascia was considered the scraps of cadavers and the snake-oil cure of alternative therapeutic practices like myofascial massage, rolfing, and movement training. As fascia is invisible except during dissection, its absence in modern anatomy texts is a particularly significant exclusion that has inhered in social and cultural norms. Foregrounding touch and fascia challenges the Western anatomical vision of reality as musculoskeletal, a concept that emerged after dissection revealed muscularity as the agents of structure and function and was documented as such by Galen and, later, Vesalius. Under this view, despite coindicated myofascial pain, fibromyalgia is biomedically considered a musculoskeletal disease and is assessed and treated as such. However, evidence suggests fibromyalgia is fascial in origin. Unlike joints and muscle, fascia possesses continuity, nervous system investments, and vascular relationships throughout the body and heavily influences functional unity, and is impacted by processes such as habitual sitting posture, stress, trauma, and surgical intervention (Lewit, 1979; Myers, 2009; Schultz and Feitis, 1996). If fibromyalgia is a disease of fascia, which can only be encountered through touch, it must be assessed not with the eyes, but by how the body feels.
Phenomenologies of touch have pointed out that vision is not necessarily the superior sensory modality. Merleau-Ponty (1962) has recognized that touch is extremely difficult to deceive, as contact conveys both form and content of reality around which other sensory meanings can occur, and that we should celebrate the function of the invisible. He notes that “the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 94), which can and does include ambivalent presences such as phantom pain as part of an I committed to a certain physical and inter-human world, who continues to tend towards his world despite handicaps and amputations and who, to this extent, does not recognise them de jure (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 94). In other words, the embodied world sets the conditions for our existence, and we experience the world as embodied subjects, largely through our fascia, which habitude our emotional and physical reactions and project our future bodily responses. As such, fascia may be conceived as an “organ of form” changing to accommodate and memorize our habitual movements to reduce our expenditure of effort when we assume our usual postures but also, potentially, trapping us in them (Rolf, 1989, p. 37). This in and of itself is suggestive of the physiological cost of the postures encouraged by disciplinary power and ideologies of productivity.

Fibromyalgia causes a heightened interoception, or awareness of internal bodily processes like sliding, sticking, or pain in the fascia, leading to disordered pain processing. However, this may also be read as a tactile cunning, as it channels an awareness of how our bodies become trapped in our habits, and how the innumerable crises of our modern embodied world may contribute to that entrapment. A reliance on peripheral sensing and high interoceptive sensitivity, both characteristic of chronic pain sufferers, has been correlated with an increased ability to affectively and cognitively empathize with others, especially with their pain (Grynberg and Pollatos, 2015). Empathy, a feminine quality of mētis, can be thought of as a “feeling into,” the ability to project yourself into another. Arguably, the mētis of fibromyalgia urges a reciprocal sensation in its witnesses, encouraging the intersubjective construction of pain and a collective turn to empathizing with bodies evincing pain instead of shying away, castigating them, or presuming they are “faking it.” Fibromyalgia masquerade effects a temporary restoration of the sufferer’s voice, compelling its witnesses to see and sense the body differently and, potentially, to retrain their own mode of being.

Finally, as a richly sensory organ that interfaces with both the visceral body, the skin, and the external environment, fascia is the organ best equipped to deal with contingency and being in a threatening, unpredictable world made even more so by fibromyalgia. Dumit & O’Connor (2016, p. 40) suggest fascia models a “thinking in our edges,” a peripheral, tactile intelligence that mimics the aspects of a feminine mētis invested not only in cunning, deception, and evasion but also prudence, empathy, and (self-)care. The mētis of fibromyalgia aims to reveal to the medical gaze how our bodies are physically random and mechanically disordered, as we unconsciously modify, solidify, or liquefy our fascia and tend to keep our postures and postures-in-action unless forces alter these for us (Myers, 2009). This bodily knowledge suggests that fibromyalgic assessment must be, to some degree, hands-on and felt. If the fibromyalgic patient is to focus medical attention to this end, she must intuitively, creatively perform her pain into visibility that directs the physician to feeling whole possible meridians of referred pain rather than specific sites, thus overcoming the humanitarian/biomedical reluctance to witness pain in treating it. Made visible through masquerade, the mētis of fibromyalgia is a lived, embodied, ceaseless effort to “strip the civilized
disguises from pain” (Morris, 1991, p. 118) a finding of ways in a pain-repressed world to feel and express both pain and numbness with contextual overtones that dissolve binaries like stoic/weak, masculine/feminine, caring/apathetic.

This is what the fibromyalgic woman of mētis works towards. As Fortunati (2016, n.p.) observes, mētis is more culturally instinctive for women, such that women are more likely to possess phrónesis when it comes to communication strategies and social masquerade to “make their message incisive.” Managing affects and emotions already inheres in the feminine labor of care, bestowing on women a cunning intuition about others’ emotional wellbeing in the sphere of social reproduction. Women, then, already understand that “emotions work like multipliers of energy”; thus, the fibromyalgic woman grasps without much struggle that emotions place costly demands on energy as well, and can intuit how to coax energy investments out of others around them: for instance, an empathy that quietly insists on touch and human connection, as opposed to the depersonalized tactics of massified healthcare. Ultimately, the scream on palpation is this woman’s pain cunningly made visible, literally restoring her voice and the conditions of her lived experience, offering physicians willing to attend yet another clue in the puzzle of a so-called wastebasket diagnosis, attempting to further the disorder’s acceptance and legitimacy.

The reductive biomedical model of pain asserts that pain is danger. As a chronic pain disorder, fibromyalgia insists that the sufferer replace this meaning with a paradoxical and personal one: “Pain signifies nothing” (Morris, 1998, p. 117). Where acute pain teaches avoidance of the offending stimuli, fibromyalgia instructs its sufferer in rewiring her beliefs about experiencing and appropriately responding to pain. Fibromyalgia is incurable, and, unlike the able-bodied subject, fascia training does not offer a cure so much as a system of management that replaces the biomedical model of pain with a biocultural one that recognizes both body and mind as implicated in sensory processes. This constitutes a management of instinct, a union of intuition and cognition, accepting that pain of varying intensities signifies nothing, but attending closely enough to tell when it does. Like mētis, this cannot be taught; it must be learned as bodily knowledge, habituated, like the fascia it seeks to make the visible locus of this form of chronic pain.

Conclusion

In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Albert Camus (1955) considers the Greek myth of Sisyphus, whose mētis outstripped that of the gods, and who is best known for temporarily rearchitecting the laws of mortality by briefly capturing Thanatos and, after his own death, deceiving Hades to revive. For this he is punished with endless labor that knows no culmination. However, Camus considers that the eternal, futile task is not a source of torment for this man of mētis but a source of satisfaction and ultimately a reason for resisting. Sisyphus must embrace as a reason for living a consciousness of the absence of remedy for the absurd unfairness of existence, and living for it is synonymous with finding a way out. Selfish a figure as Sisyphus is, we can extract the common from this, just as folkloric Trickster slips the traps set for him not just to escape but to reveal the trap for what it is and preemptively thwart its future iterations, performing what Hyde (2010) calls “dirt work”: moving the taboo exclusions of polite society into the places of its exclusion. In doing so, Trickster seeks to introduce a “third thing” to disturb the webs of signification that create and reinforce the binaries that bind us. By channeling mētis, the fibromyalgic patient can transform the eternal, futile
task of daily survival into finding a way out, can become adept at using parts of her body that are invisible to human and mechanical eyes to subtly challenge the efficacy of visual assessment.

Healthcare is a complex of commercial practices that support the project of quantification for massification; fibromyalgia, with its personalized fascia arrangements, regardless of standardized trigger points which already seem arbitrary, inherently resists these practices. To this end, the fetish of the visual in biomedicine is stubbornly persistent, even regarding imaging techniques that are problematic or questionable at best: for instance, the injection of contrast material into joints or bloodstream or the digestive use of nuclear medicine to measure gastric emptying and potential correlations with disorders like fibromyalgia or irritable bowel syndrome; or the metrics offered by wearable technologies that claim to monitor physical fitness or mental acuity, while problematically reducing experience to a biochemical model, and not a biocultural one. Like the lineage of Ouranos, each all-seeing, all-knowing son matched only by Metis, “this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581) characterized by unregulated, devouring vision. Chronic pain is so resistant to ocularcentric biomedical thinking that effective treatment depends on the physician’s willingness to assess in more ways than one. Mētis is perhaps most significantly exhibited in the fibromyalgic subject’s ability to present herself, based on fascia training and interoception, to the medical gaze in ways that align with the biomedical model of pain as treatable and musculoskeletal in origin, but diverge enough to compel physicians to perceive her body differently, necessitating other sensory modes of assessment: dialogue rather than symptom listing or one-sided interrogation; and, notably, palpation of a pressure that potentially inflicts pain, which is anathema to post-anesthetic cultures. The mētis of fibromyalgia further acts on language and secondary expressions of pain, awaiting the opportune moment to strategically, cunningly express pain in ways popularly presumed authentic without extending it so long it becomes, a la Philoctetes, alienating under the humanitarian sensibility or the biomedical impetus to rehabilitate—to instead show that aurality and a firm touch where touch is not a minor mode of assessment can create a generative connection between bodies, opening new avenues for communication, empathy, potentially affecting the form and space of all bodies involved and qualitatively altering their relations (Manning, 2007).

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Technology Resistance and de Certeau: Deceptive texting as a Tactic of Everyday Life

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Previous research has identified the “butler lie”—a lie told through text message to explain why someone is, was, or will be unavailable for interaction (Hancock et al., 2009). The concept of butler lying was established by Hancock et al. (2009, p. 519) who coined the term in allusion “to the social buffering function that butlers provided for their employers” when lying to visitors about whether family members were home. Several studies indicate that butler lies are a common means of managing social availability (Birnholtz et al., 2010; Birnholtz et al., 2013; Reynolds et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2014). Drawing on an interview based study into the experiences of telling and receiving butler lies via text message, this article argues that butler lies can be understood as a form of technology resistance as they represent an effort to evade the perpetual connectivity afforded by mobile communication technologies. However, as a quotidian and often habitual practice, one enacted through the technology it also resists, butler lies fall outside current conceptualisations of technology resistance which have tended to focus on self-reflexive acts of limiting or rejecting particular technologies. To aid in framing butler lies as a resistant practice, I turn to de Certeau’s (1984) concept of “tactics” as a means of theorising mundane, habitual modes of technology resistance. In doing so, I seek not only to introduce butler lying as a concept of technology resistance, but to demonstrate the significance of developing the largely latent connections between de Certeau and research on technology resistance.

Introduction: Butler Lies

A “butler lie” is a lie told through text message to explain why someone is, was, or will be unavailable for interaction. The interactions being avoided could be face-to-face interactions, such as meeting up for coffee, or digitally mediated interactions, such as texting. The concept of butler lying was established by Hancock et al. (2009, p. 519) who coined the term in allusion “to the social buffering function that butlers provided for their employers” when lying to visitors about whether family members were home. Subsequent research suggests that butler lying is a commonplace means of negotiating social availability (Birnholtz et al., 2010; Birnholtz et al., 2013; Reynolds et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2014).

This article argues that butler lies can be understood as a form of technology resistance that is enacted by leveraging the affordances of the technology being resisted. Presently, scholarship on technology resistance is primarily interested in forms of resistance enacted self-reflexively by people concerned about the role of technology within their lives. Often this involves stopping or limiting the use of a technology. In contrast, butler lies are a widespread practice (Smith et al., 2014) that are
performed through the technology being resisted and often enacted habitually, with little self-reflection. Viewing butler lies as technology resistance therefore requires an expansion of our understanding of technology resistance.

Michel de Certeau’s (1984) theorisation of everyday “tactics” of resistance provides a basis for expanding our understanding of resistance to include widespread, quotidian, habitual acts like the butler lie. Much of de Certeau’s understanding of the tactical is already aligned with much of the scholarship on resistance. However, this article argues that the links between de Certeau and technology resistance literature can be further developed, and that doing so encourages and justifies looking at practices like the butler lie.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first, I give an overview of literature on technology resistance in order to argue that while butler lies presently fall outside the scope of resistance literature, they are aligned with its growing interest in people who resist technologies in partial and fragmented ways. The second section discusses the links between technology resistance literature and de Certeau, demonstrating that while this literature draws on and embodies many of the characteristics of “tactics”, these links centre around a particular understanding of tactics as self-reflexive actions taken by small groups of people. I argue that these links between de Certeau and resistance literature can be extended to include other ways that de Certeau describes tactics. In the third section, I draw these two arguments together via an empirical study of butler lying. The purpose of introducing this empirical case study is not solely to argue for the significance of butler lying as a practice, but also to illustrate the theoretical argument being made; that a closer reading of de Certeau encourages us to acknowledge more varied modes of resistance, particularly by attending to the ways that resistant acts can be habitual, evasive, embodied, and enacted through consumption of the technologies they resist.

Resistance to and non-use of digital communication technologies

While most scholarship on digital communication focuses on who uses it and how, there is also a growing body of work that investigates who does not use it and why. Broadly speaking, this interest emerged from two distinct but related contexts. In sociology, media studies, and policy research, scholars studied non-users as part of the effort to map the “digital divide” and, increasingly, to challenge the prevailing assumption that digital communication technology was an inherent social good such that anyone who did not use it either lacked access or failed to understand its benefits (Selwyn, 2003; Wyatt et al., 2002). Similarly, in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), early interest in non-users was framed as an important corrective to the field’s long standing focus on users and usability, and the relatively unchallenged definitions of these terms (Satchell and Dourish, 2009).

From these beginnings, research on non-use and resistance has grown into a considerable body of literature. Scholars have looked at resistance to, or non-use of, specific communication technologies including Myspace (Tufekci, 2008), Grindr (Brubaker et al., 2016), Twitter (Schoenebeck, 2014), Smartphones (Ribak and Rosenthal, 2015) and, most commonly, Facebook (Baumer, 2015; Karppi, 2011; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Rainie et al., 2013; Tufekci, 2008). A key objective within this literature has been identifying the factors that motivate non-use and resistance. These have included
privacy concerns (Baumer et al., 2013; Tufekci, 2008), a desire to curb perceived technology addictions (Baumer et al., 2013), disenchantment with a technology (Morrison and Gomez, 2014; Satchell and Dourish, 2009), a desire to avoid distraction and/or create more productive time (Baumer et al., 2013; Sleeper et al., 2015; Schoenebeck, 2014) and concerns about, or disinterest in, a form of socialisation that is deemed inauthentic (Sleeper, 2015; Tufekci, 2008; Woodstock, 2014).

Another key focus has been developing typologies of non-users and media resisters. One early, influential typology proposed by Wyatt et al. (2002) outlined four types of internet non-users: “resisters”, who had, by choice, never used the internet; “rejecters”, who had voluntarily stopped using it; the “excluded”, who had never used it because they lacked access; and the “expelled”, who had stopped using it involuntarily. From this initial typology, with its clear distinction between use and non-use, more recent typologies have sought to account for greater varieties, and more complex types of resistant non-use. For example, Satchell and Dourish (2009) propose a typology that aims to acknowledge how use and non-use of technologies are “systematically related to each other as part of a broader [cultural] framework.” They outline six forms of non-use: “lagging adoption”, to describe people who delay adoption; “active resistance”, to describe “diehard lagging adopters who never adopt”; “disenchantment”, to describe people who resist on account of nostalgia or a view of computer mediated communication as inauthentic; “disenfranchisement”, to describe people who lack access; “displacement”, to describe people who don’t use a particular technology but still benefit from it (such as a person who doesn’t use Facebook, but whose friends inform them about things happening on it); and “disinterest”, to describe people who feel a technology is irrelevant.

As research on the categories of, and motivations behind, technology resistance has developed, many scholars have begun questioning the assumption that use and resistance are mutually exclusive. For instance, several scholars have investigated resistant practices that are episodic or temporary rather than permanent. This is the focus of a study by Schoenebeck (2014) that describes the cyclic patterns of over-use and hiatus among people who give up Twitter for Lent. Similarly, Rainie et al. (2013) found that 61 percent of the Facebook users they surveyed had taken voluntary breaks—or “Facebook vacations”—lasting several weeks or more. Where these two studies look at breaks of significant duration, Lee et al. (2014) explore more momentary and haphazard acts of resistance. They surveyed people about their dissatisfaction with smartphones and found that 59 percent of their sample employed forms of temporary non-use in an attempt to combat issues like distraction and fatigue. Popular methods included altering phone settings (such as using aeroplane modes), physical separation (such as leaving a phone at home), mental efforts (such as setting personal non-use goals), employing intervention software (that is, software to restrict phone usage), and downgrading to a simpler phone or provider plan.

As the field has moved towards models that reflect a greater interweaving of use and resistance, there has also been increased interest in forms of resistance motivated by peoples’ impressions that particular technologies generate unrealistic expectations to stay continually connected to people, information, and devices. Morrison and Gomez (2014), for instance, identify the development of “pushback” which they describe as “a growing phenomenon among frequent technology users seeking to regain control, establish boundaries, resist information overload, and establish greater personal life balance.” “Pushback” actions include making collective agreements to restrict use, employing technological tools, or self-regulating use. Similarly, Woodstock (2014, p. 1983) argues
that “media resistance” is “a significant set of behavioural responses to living in a media-saturated world” whereby people “intentionally and significantly limit their media use.” This limiting of media use is minimal, however, as Woodstock’s participants are largely working professionals who need to stay informed and connected in their working lives. In their study of “downsizing”, Ribak and Rosenthal (2015) report results from interviews with people who voluntarily use a “feature phone” (a phone with only basic, cumbersome internet capability) or “basic phone” (a phone that only allows for calling and texting) as opposed to a smartphone. These people are termed “smartphone resisters” but rather than being a clear-cut critique of communication technologies, their device choices are instead an expression of ambivalence towards the ubiquity of smartphones and the media saturated environment smartphones exemplify.

This body of literature offers important insights into how people actively resist the connective affordances of digital communication technologies. It demonstrates that, along with rejecting particular technologies, resistance is also enacted in ways that are temporary, cyclical, and embedded in daily practices of use. However, while these studies challenge prior distinctions between use and resistance, they tend to focus on the resistant practices of specialist groups of users. For scholars like Morrison and Gomez (2014), Woodstock (2014), and Ribak and Rosenthal (2015), resistant actions are the atypical practices of a particularly reflexive minority. Such reflexive minorities provide a rich and important site of study, but understandings of digital communication resistance could also be expanded to include more widespread and quotidian practices. In what follows, I suggest that this expansion is supported by de Certeau and illustrated by butler lies.

**De Certeau’s Tactics**

Writing in the 1980s, and more particularly in the wake of May 1968 and the associated developments in French thought, de Certeau shared with his contemporaries Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu an interest in the power structures of everyday life. However, while Foucault (e.g. 1977) and Bourdieu (e.g. 1984) attended to the processes through which structural powers are reproduced, de Certeau was interested in how people operate within and in spite of such powers. For de Certeau, tactics are the everyday resistant practices of the weak. Lacking power, those who are “already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (1984, p. xiv) must use *metis*-creative acts of cunning—to enact resistance. These tactics stand in contrast to “strategy.” For de Certeau (1984, p. 36), a strategy has the power to postulate “a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats...can be managed” [emphasis in original]. So where strategy draws on a circumscribed place of authority that gives it foresight and longevity, a tactic lacks “a proper locus”—a defined place from which it can view “the adversary as a whole” (1984, p. 37). To compensate, a tactic “must accept the chance offerings of the moment” and “make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers” (1984, p. 37).

**Tactics and technology resistance research**

While the weak lack power, they retain a degree of agency, allowing them to execute fragmented and opportunistic acts of resistance. This acknowledgement of agency was the reason Selwyn (2003) included “tactics” in his seminal work on the non-use of digital communication. As mentioned,
early conceptualisations of non-users tended to pathologise non-use or presume non-users simply lacked access. In contesting this understanding of non-use, Selwyn (2003, p. 111) suggests that non-use “could be seen as a “tactic of resistance”, described by de Certeau as an ordinary practice that enables disenfranchised and oppressed people to realise their variety of voices, maintain communities, and achieve practical kinds of power.” Selwyn thus reimagines non-use not as abnormal or forced exclusion but as active resistance against unwanted technologies.

Further reinforcing the agency of the weak, much of the way de Certeau describes tactics is either suggestive of, or explicitly draws on, the notion of warfare. He speaks of tactics as the “polemology [study of war] of the weak” (1984, p. 39) and as “poetic as well as warlike” (1984, p. xix), and draws repeatedly on guerrilla combat as a metaphor for how tactics operate in secretive and opportunistic ways. This metaphor is evoked, for instance, in his description of a tactic as a “blow by blow” action that must “take advantage of opportunities” as it lacks “any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37).

De Certeau’s guerrilla combat analogy maps closely onto many of the current understandings of technology resistance. Resistant practices are often seen as isolated actions intended to wrest back small measures of control from the sociotechnical imperative to connect. They are the actions of a tenacious minority who employ creative tactics to exploit moments and spaces where the connective imperative is weakest. For instance, Morrison and Gomez (2014) discuss how during events like weddings and shared meals the imperative to digitally connect holds less sway and, through the weight of collective agreements, can thereby be temporarily resisted by likeminded people. Similarly, using intervention software to limit the use of a particular device, platform, or website is not a direct affront to the technology in question but rather disables it in small, isolated instances for short periods of time (Lee et al., 2014; Morrison and Gomez, 2014).

The warfare metaphor is similarly evoked in Woodstock’s (2014, p. 1986) aforementioned study of “media resisters” who “intentionally and significantly limit their media use” on account of “their sense that media constitute an oppressive onslaught to be held in abeyance.” Woodstock (2014, pp. 1988-1989) draws directly on de Certeau, equating “media resistance” to a demonstration of tactics and strategies by arguing that “[t]he pervasive, dominant media environment against which media resisters position themselves constitutes a strategy, while the resisters employ tactics to avoid media, but are structurally limited in their ability to do so.” According to this formulation, media resisters are a distinct type of user whose particular attributes—namely their “social and cultural capital” (2014, p. 1988) and “purposeful, considered stance” (2014, p. 1986)—enable them to inflict a barrage of small, isolated acts of resistance upon the broader digital communications environment.

The concept of tactics-as-warfare provides a useful means of conceptualising the efforts of people who take small but determined actions to fight against the pressures of digital communication. However, tactics—and technology resistance—are not always analogous to combat. As Ben Highmore notes, de Certeau’s warfare analogy, while constructive, sets up an unhelpful expectation that tactics always involve a high degree of purposeful opposition and direct conflict. This expectation is not borne out in many of de Certeau’s other descriptions of tactics, nor in many of the specific examples he gives: “talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking” (1984, p. xix).
Tactics as an extension of technology resistance research

While a full survey of the complexity of de Certeau’s formulation of tactics is beyond the scope and aims of this article, some aspects are especially pertinent for extending our understanding of digital communication resistance.

One description of tactics that departs from the tactic-as-warfare motif is the idea of consumption as a tactic. Arguing against the then prevailing view of consumption as passive acquiescence, de Certeau characterises it as a “kind of production” (1984, p. 31) that is manifest “through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (1984, p. xiii). For de Certeau, consumption is an active process of constructing personal meanings out of standardised commodities and texts. When reading, for example, a reader is selective, “poaching” elements that allow them to interpret the text in ways that are meaningful to them (de Certeau, 1984, p.xxi). This understanding of consumption as a form of production enacted within a text illustrates a further characteristic of tactics; they work through and within the same system they resist. Rather than being in opposition to disciplinary power, in the sense of being external to it, tactics can only resist such power by making use of the opportunities and resources it permits; they “elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 96).

Further departing from tactics-as-warfare, many of de Certeau’s descriptions of tactics evoke moments of buffering or evading. This case is made by Ben Highmore (2002, pp. 151-122) who argues that the resistance Certeau sees within the tactics of everyday life “is not synonymous with opposition” but rather “…is closer to the use of the term in electronics and psychoanalysis: it is what hinders and dissipates the energy flow of domination.” As an example, Highmore draws on de Certeau’s discussion of the tactic of la perruque—the practice of a worker doing personal tasks on company time. This practice demonstrates how “rather than confronting and opposing” a dominant power, tactics “take place in its blindspots”, leaving the power “relatively unscathed” (Highmore, 2002, p. 160). By wasting company time, de Certeau’s worker illustrates how tactics can be a withholding of action, an inertia that does not impact dominant structures but rather momentarily evades them, enabling invisible acts of defiance rather than small but direct attacks.

This tactical defiance can also be less a cognitive process—as suggested by the sly actions of guerrilla combat—and more a bodily one. Highmore (2002, p. 160) again makes this case when he uses the body of a production line worker as an example of a non-warlike tactic; its tiredness is a form of bodily resistance to the machinic movements and efficiency logics of production line labour. De Certeau himself pays particular attention to the bodily enactment of resistance in his extended discussion of walking in the city. Characterising walking as an enunciative act, de Certeau (1984, p. 97) claims that “[t]he act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language.” Just as speaking can involve playing on, or diverging from, the proper use of language, so too can walking play on the proper use of a city as determined by city planners and administrators. Rather than following the paths and processes intended by corporate and governmental powers, a walker “writes” their own trajectories and desire lines as they wander, window shop, take shortcuts, pause, or double back (1984, p. 93). This idea of movement as tactic privileges bodily process over mental
calculation; it is improvised and “blind” (1984, p. 94), a form of “tactile apprehension and kinaesthetic appropriation” (1984, p. 97).

As these examples suggest, tactics can be considered less a carefully planned, deliberate action, and more an expression of instinct, habit, and other less conscious thought processes. The walker, for instance, acts below the “thresholds of visibility” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93) as they lack the totalising view of the “panoptic administration” (1984, p. 96). Without a complete perspective of the city, or their place within it, walkers’ “bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read” (1984, p. 93). Many of the other tactics de Certeau describes are similarly mindless actions; speaking, cooking, and reading are practices that are routine, habitual and instinctive. They observe a logic, but this logic is not one crafted consciously in the moment by the person who is being tactical—it seems to surmount “the very institution of consciousness” (1984, p. 40). As Highmore (2003, p. 171) observes, “the tactical activities that de Certeau sees as so essential to everyday life are a mix of creative moments of getting by (making the best of things) and a host of stubborn insistences (the past, the body, the unconscious).”

Butler Lying: A Practice of Tactical Resistance

Methods

As a widely practiced behaviour, butler lying via text message takes many forms. Some of these forms reinforce the existing links between technology resistance literature and de Certeau in that they are self-reflexive acts that seek to wrest back a measure of control from the technological imperative to connect. Other forms, however, illustrate the value of expanding the links between de Certeau and resistance research. These forms of butler lying are habitual, deeply quotidian, and ultimately focused more on coping than on gaining ground against the technology they resist. In what follows, I outline the methods used in my study of butler lying. I then draw on this study, along with the prior literature on butler lying, to demonstrate how this deception can be seen as a tactic of resistance.

The concept of butler lying via text message emerges from the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI)—a multidisciplinary field focused on improving the usability of computing technologies. Accordingly, prior studies are primarily interested in how better understanding butler lying can inform the design of messaging technologies (Hancock et al., 2009; Birnholtz et al., 2010; Reynolds et al., 2013; Birnholtz et al., 2013). To explore how the concept of butler lying might be extended beyond this instrumental focus, I conducted a qualitative research project in order to explore the personal, relational, and emotional implications of butler lying. The project involved an interview study conducted in 2014 that explored the experiences of butler lying among young people living in Melbourne.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a cohort most relevant to my research interests (Bryman, 2008 p. 416-418). Participants were recruited from local universities using online advertising. As much of the existing research focuses primarily on university students, targeting a similar demographic made my work more immediately comparable (Hancock et al., 2009; Birnholtz et al., 2010; Reynolds et al., 2013; Birnholtz et al., 2013). Furthermore, recruiting through universities
meant respondents were likely to be within the preferred age range (18-25 years). This age was chosen partly to align with the prior research, and partly because young people provide a rich content for studying this practice given their typically frequent use of texting (Nielsen Research, 2010; Smith, 2011) and fluid, dynamic social lives. Sampling stopped when theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no significant new insights were being generated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Participants were aged 18-30 years, lived in Melbourne at the time of the interview, and had used texting for five years or more. The majority identified as Australian and were either presently studying or had recently completed studies. Five participants were men and seventeen were women. While the aim of this study was not to be representative of a particular population, it is worth noting that this gender bias may have influenced the findings. It is unlikely, however, that the influence of gender is significant in terms of the frequency of butler lying among my participants as prior research has produced contradictory findings about the correlation between gender and rates of butler lying. Hancock et al. (2009 p. 522) found higher rates of lying among male participants while French et al. (2015 p. 4082) found higher rates among females.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured approach. Participants were asked to record examples of butler lies that they sent or received in the time leading up to their interview. These examples were used during the interviews to prompt recollections. Interviews were digitally recorded with participants’ permission, partially transcribed, and coded to identify key themes. All names are pseudonyms.

**Butler Lies as Resistant Tactic**

While the act of telling a butler lie is, on the one hand, resistance to particular, individual requests for contact, taken as a practice butler lying can also be seen as resistance to particular technological conditions. While butler lies do not involve the complete rejection of a technology, and in fact use the technology to reject the use of the technology, they are akin to other resistant practices like “pushback” and “media resistance” in that they are a momentary rejection of mobile technology’s connective affordances. This rejection can occur in two ways. Firstly, lies that are used to avoid replying to a text message are resistant in that they perform a buffering function, momentarily holding at bay a request to connect. Secondly, butler lies that are used to avoid or deny requests to meet up in person resist the connective affordance of mobile media by running counter to one of its primary instrumental functions—coordinating physical meet ups (Battestini et al., 2010).

This broader view of butler lies as a cunning act of resistance against the demands of networked sociality is suggested by prior work on the butler lie. Within this literature, butler lies are framed as a coping mechanism for dealing with the constant connectivity of digitally networked sociality (Birnholtz et al., 2010, p. 1; Hancock et al., 2009, p. 517). While these assertions are repeated across the literature, they are not directly linked to empirical material. This causality hypothesis was, however, raised by many of my participants who felt that the pressures of digital, mobile communication meant they had greater cause to be deceptive than previous generations. Frederick (male, 22, Australian), for example, suggested butler lies are more prevalent today because “[w]e just don’t find personal space with all these forms of communication.” This lack of personal space makes it “necessary” to use butler lies, because “we want to find space for ourselves... whereas [for]
previous generations I think there was heaps of personal space.” A similar view was echoed by Lauren (female, 20, Australian Aboriginal) who felt that butler lying was more prevalent because of the way digital technology facilitated an uncomfortable degree of ubiquitous interpersonal awareness:

[I]t’s like people know what you’re doing all the time, whereas [in the past] you had a home phone, so it’s like you’re either at home or you’re not at home and they don’t know where you are.

For some, this increased availability justified being deceptive. Imogen (female, 18, Australian), for example, stated:

I guess in a way they’re [butler lies] unethical... but, it needs to happen, cause you’re literally available 24/7 and you can’t be.

As a form of resistance to the connective imperatives of mobile communication, butler lies align, in part, with the notion of tactics-as-warfare—reinforcing the current nexus between de Certeau and technology resistance literature. In particular, butler lies echo the idea of resistance as akin to guerrilla combat as both the prior butler lying literature and the accounts of my participants describe butler lying as a practice requiring careful consideration and wily execution in order to exploit opportunities presented by both social and technological conditions. In terms of technological conditions, butler lying draws on the ambiguities of texting which, with its limited meta-textual information, means that generally interlocutors are unaware of each other’s geographical location, the activities they are undertaking, and when they receive or read messages. Many participants noted however that the introduction of read receipts or message read notifications complicated this ambiguity by providing additional, albeit vague, information. In terms of social conditions, Birnholtz et al. (2013, p. 2) note the careful calculations enacted by their respondents who “carefully design their butler lies to be perceived positively” by weighing up “the potential relational consequences of a possible lie, as well as the relationship’s resilience to a possibly blunt telling of the truth.”

Participants in my own research similarly recalled complex processes of careful consideration and execution. Often these processes involved deliberation about the ratio of truth to fiction required for a lie to be sufficiently deceptive, but still plausible and justifiable as not a “proper lie.” Frederick describes this as “manoeuvring”:

I guess the way I communicate is I manoeuvre, I say things in such a way that I don’t complete outright lie to a person; I make it in such a way that it is, in some degree, a truth.

For many participants, manoeuvring was important not just for making the lie believable, but also for rationalising the use of the lie as a legitimate and ethical social practice. Another key consideration was finding a lie that would sufficiently explain why a person wasn’t available while also dissuading the lie recipient from asking for further details. This led to “study” and “family issues” emerging as highly favoured excuses. Crafting a successful lie also involved thinking about the follow-through actions it required. For Samantha (female, 21, Italian Australian), who is not much of a “night owl”, this was particularly important when friends messaged her late at night. She would
delay replying until the morning and then claim that she had been asleep when they messaged, but in order to keep her story consistent she would stay off social media after receiving the message so there was no evidence of her having been awake.

In these accounts, butler lies reinforce the idea that resistance to digital communication can be tactical in the sense of being direct, calculated, and opportunistic. As evidenced in these accounts, butler lies often required planning, thoughtful execution, and careful follow through in order to ensure that they were believable and effective. This self-reflexive process directly sought to wrest back small degrees of personal space from an unfair expectation of constant availability.

**Butler Lies as Alternative Tactics: Embodied, Automatic, Invisible**

In addition to reinforcing the existing parallels between de Certeau’s tactics and literature on resistance to digital communication, butler lies also illustrate how further understandings of tactics might provide models for considering alternate forms of digital communication resistance. Firstly, butler lies suggest that, in addition to being a carefully crafted act of “guerrilla combat”, resistance can also be habitual. For many participants, butler lies were often instinctive, automatic reactions conducted with little conscious deliberation. The language used to describe these kinds of experiences included descriptions of butler lying as “coming quite naturally”, “instantly” or being “pretty quick and, like, thoughtless.” There were also references to butler lies being “generally pretty automatic”, “second nature”, or happening “subconsciously.”

This automatic, thoughtless mode of butler lying was also apparent in the surprising tendency for participants to have limited awareness of their own butler lying. Several participants expressed having been largely unaware of telling butler lies until prompted by their participation in the research. Emma (female, 20, Hong Kong Australian), for instance, explained that she only became aware that she told butler lies after I had explained the idea of butler lying in the lead up to our interview. Prior to my detailed descriptions of the behaviour, she “probably would have been like ‘oh I don’t do that’.” Similarly, Charlotte (female, 20, Australian) described butler lying as:

...along the basis of like just a white lie, but more ones that are specifically, you know, that you send without really realising you were lying. Like I went through my phone and I found examples as well, and they’re a lot more prevalent than you realise.

For some participants, this lack of self-awareness meant they later came to regret the deception. For Lauren, the fact her butler lying “comes quite naturally” meant this happened often.

It’s like instantly you can think of one, like any excuse that you can use. So because you don’t have that long thought process about it, it gives you less time to feel guilty about it... and like, you convince yourself that it’s true, after [text] messaging them about this lie.

Later, she would reflect on the deceptive nature of her statement, leading to feelings of regret: “A lot of the time, if it’s to a close friend, I’ll call an hour later and be like “I’m really sorry, I actually wasn’t doing that.”
These experiences of butler lying demonstrate how resistance isn’t always necessarily a carefully calculated action, but can also be an automatic or habitual practice. As with de Certeau’s walker, who resists an efficient use of the city in ways that are blind and habitual, many of my participants engaged in deception with little forethought or calculation. Suggesting that butler lying is often instinctive or automatic is not to say, however, that butler lying is thoughtless and therefore not resistant. Rather, automatic butler lying could be seen as a necessary habituation of perception and response required for coping with the participants’ technological milieu. As Highmore (2011, pp. 114-138) observes, relegating responses to bodily routine and subconscious processes—processes guided by the consolidation of prior experience into a field of apperception—enables people to maintain a state of “distracted attention.” Common experiences can then be processed quickly, leaving cognitive functions free for processing the new and unexpected and, ultimately, for better managing the influx of information facilitated by media and communication technologies.

These instinctive, habitual experiences run counter to the way butler lies are described in the original literature, and the way technology resistance is largely understood. Another characteristic of butler lying that departs from prior descriptions of butler lying and technology resistance, but that is aligned with de Certeau’s tactics, is the significance of butler lying as an embodied act. Participants described bodies being implicated in butler lying in two distinct ways. In the first, participants reflected on how texting as a communicative medium facilitated a process of deception that was physically easier because it removed the need to control their voice or body language. For many this meant they were more likely to lie in situations where texting was available to them as a means of communication as they were less likely to be inadvertently given away by bodily cues of nervousness. This was the case for Emily (female, 24, Australian), who explained:

I think it’s easier to lie via text, because there’s no kind of emotional tone in your voice...and there’s no telling signs that you are lying...and I know that obviously lying is not good but every now and again, when you do do it, you still don’t want to be caught out.

In these instances the impetus to lie stemmed from, or was enhanced by, the physical ease of lying through the protective barrier of texting.

In addition to this protective barrier, the embodied act of texting was important in another way: for some, their dislike of the physical action of writing a text partly motivated their deception. These participants felt that explaining and justifying the truthful reason for their unavailability was possible, but that it would require long and/or multiple messages that would be physically tedious to type out. This was also the case for Emily who expressed a strong dislike of texting: “[i]t just takes too long, and I hate, I actually hate like writing messages.” This frustration with the physical act of messaging was compounded by her writing style: “I don’t abbreviate a lot so I end up writing proper full words and it’s just exhausting.” When communicating with acquaintances about her availability, this dislike of texting became an issue as, unlike her close friends or family, they required a lot of background information to understand her reasons for being unavailable. Communicating this background information meant she needed to send more and longer messages. Accordingly, she would rather send a short false message, like “Hey I’m sort of not feeling it today,
I’m a bit under the weather”, than explain the truth because “it just feels like it’s too exhausting to explain what I’m doing.”

Where prior research on technology resistance has focused on the mental efforts and processes involved in resisting the allure of technology, these accounts point to the materiality of messaging, and the embodied experience of using it, as key drivers of deception. They suggest that while many acts of technology resistance are mental tactics—making bargains, agreements, commitments, and plans—it is important to consider how the physical and material experiences of digital communication might contribute to, or shape, the ways we resist them and their affordances. The significance of embodied experience is reinforced by de Certeau’s (1984) descriptions of tactics as physical experiences—walking in particular—where the body resists using its surroundings in the ways designers had intended. Highmore’s illustration of a factory worker as tactical also provides a helpful comparison; just as the psychical lethargy of the factory worker constituted a form of resistance to the efficiency drives of the production lines, the physical experiences of malaise and security drove my participants’ resistance to the sociotechnical imperative to connect and engage.

Lastly, butler lies illustrate how digital technology resistance can also be enacted through consumption, mirroring the way that the weak, within de Certeau’s formation of tactics, make use of the dominant system within which they act (de Certeau, 1984). Rather than rejecting or limiting the use of mobile technology, butler lies are enacted through its consumption—leveraging the ambiguities it affords about a person’s location, emotional state, and current activity. Butler lies are thus enacted with and through the technology of texting, but the technology’s affordances are momentarily exploited to function as a buffer for the conditions of perpetual contact they also create.

Some of the acts identified in prior research on resistance to mobile communication can similarly be seen as acts of consumption. In particular, using the features within mobile phones, such as do-not-disturb or aeroplane mode, to stop messages being received is also an example of “consuming” the features of a device in order to disable its connective affordances. However, these acts of resistance prevent further consumption of the technology, disabling its primary affordance—communication—for an indefinite period of time. In contrast, butler lies engage with and exploit this communicative affordance, demonstrating resistant consumption of the technology that is all the more tactical for its invisibility. Butler lies, like tactics, are invisible in that they don’t mount a direct attack on mobile technology by resisting or limiting its use. Rather, they leverage the opportunities it affords for easy deception, exploiting its own materiality to momentarily hold at bay the interaction and availability it encourages. As tactics of resistance, butler lies “remain within the framework of prescribed syntaxes” of digital communication, while still being “heterogeneous” to its prevailing logics (De Certeau, 1984, p. 34).

**Conclusion**

While studies have begun to look at the resistant practices of people who use, rather than entirely reject, communication technologies, they have tended to concentrate on particularly reflexive minorities whose resistant acts have value as they “generate alternatives” and “teach us about different ways of living” (Woodstock, 2014, p. 1984). A fuller engagement with de Certeau, however, encourages us to pay greater attention to more quotidian and widespread practices. For de Certeau (1984),
attending to the resistant tactics of the everyday is critical not because it demonstrates how we can resist, but how we do resist; it brings to attention not only how the disempowered evade dominant power structures, but how the disempowered function in spite of, and even thrive within, them.

It is this mode of resistance that butler lying exemplifies. The initial HCI literature establishes that butler lies are a common practice among a considerable population. Furthermore, the participants in my study, all of whom employed some form of butler lying, expressed widely varying attitudes towards the role of communication technologies in their everyday lives—some were highly critical and deeply reflective while others were unconcerned and disinterested. Butler lies then are not a tactic employed by a select few, but rather a mundane, quotidian act practiced by a large proportion of people. As a practice enacted by everyday users of a commonplace technology, driven by malaise and habit as much as creative, self-reflexive intention, butler lies do not demonstrate a potential mode of resistance but rather a mode of resistance already widely used. This resistance does not function through small direct attacks but instead creates a momentary buffer that holds at bay the imperative to be present and available. It leaves the over-riding system intact, but provides a means for people to operate within it. The resistant practices of everyday technology users are, therefore, important because while the resistance of minorities shows us how we might get by, the resistant practices of everyday people—such as the butler lie—shows how we are already “making do” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29).

It is, however, important to note two ways in which the nexus between butler lying, technology resistance, and tactics complicates each of these concepts. Firstly, while demonstrating that resistance can be enacted through habitual practices, the accounts of automatic, instinctive butler lies also show how habituation is “both poison and cure” (Highmore, 2011, p.124) in that it privileges the already known at the expense of developing the new. For Lauren, who frequently came to regret her butler lying, this privileging of the known was leading her to engage in practices that, with hindsight, did not align with her ethics. As de Certeau explains, deception and trickery are the arts of the weak because while the weak lack power, they can be mobile and invisible (1984, p. 37). But if such tactics are enacted on the basis of the “stubborn insistences” of apperception, rather than a self-aware drive to creatively resist (Highmore, 2003, p. 171), are the weak then further disadvantaged in having to resort to deceptive cunning when that cunning is later regretted? While a philosophical investigation is not my aim here, it is worth noting that moral philosophers suggest even the most benign acts of deception, such as white lies, can have cumulative harms for the person enacting them (Bok, 1989; Isenberg, 1968). These issues of ethics, regret, and habituation raise questions about whether tactics are always to be celebrated and technology resistance is always empowering.

A second complication arises around the question of coping. The function of tactics is to “make do”—they are a means of coping more than a means of attacking. De Certeau sees this coping as resistance, and in many instances butler lies function in this manner: the breathing room they create enables people to function within the context of digital communication. However, as Light and Cassidy (2014, p. 1180) suggest in their analysis of disconnective practices on Facebook, some forms of resistance to communication technologies could perhaps be seen as “sanctioned” rejections that ultimately serve to keep a user engaged with a technology. They argue that “Despite Facebook’s desire and need for connection and global sharing, the site cannot operate solely on those terms.
Facebook therefore is inscribed with disconnective levers and release valves that allow users to remain with it” (2014, p. 1170). While different in that mobile communication is not a single platform controlled by a single company, we could perhaps ask similar questions of butler lying as a tactic. In providing a means of coping within a social and communicative system, small acts of resistance function as a release valve which, ultimately, makes it tenable for people to stay within the broader system.

REFERENCES


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Streaming Tactics
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This research seeks to conceptualize streaming media as a cultural practice, a style or poetics, which tactically challenges the “propre” strategies of mass consumer and television culture. This is a site of agonistic struggle, cunning, and constant adaptation within the emergent space of streaming. Unsanctioned streaming is wandering through the strategic “place” of copyright. Streaming is the prerogative of the in-between and deterritorialized poaching. These nodes are temporary collectives or alliances that exist as tactical, ephemeral spaces of digital media. Poaching from de Certeau (1984, p. 174), streamers are “travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching across fields they did not write.” Just as there is a “rhetoric of walking” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 100) we might think of a “style of use” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 100) for streamers traversing the geographies of nation-states and the lands of copyright holders throughout the Internet. Unsanctioned streaming of content has become a much wider cultural practice, an everyday practice, which is perceived by consumers as beyond the control of states and territorial government. Users are “making do” through cunning tactics within the practice of everyday Internet life through streaming. The employment of participant observation has yielded a series of insights: streaming has had dramatic impact on the mobility and materiality of media flow; streaming is a process that leads to aesthetic experiences (jouissance); and streamers both assume and are cast in the role of the cunning trickster. These activities of unsanctioned streamers have informed industry approaches to streaming technology, leading to emergent industry logics and the growth of a streaming industry.

Introduction

Unsanctioned streaming of content has become a banal cultural practice, an everyday practice, which is perceived by consumers as beyond the control of states and territorial government. Unsanctioned streaming is wandering through the strategic “place” of copyright. Streaming is the prerogative of the in-between and deterritorialized poaching. Streaming is identified as a liminal space of cunning, which studs daily life with tactical, aesthetic moments. These nodes are impermanent and exist as ephemeral spaces within digital media. Poaching from de Certeau (1984, p. 174), streamers are “travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching across fields they did not write.” Just as there is a “rhetoric of walking” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 100) we might think of a “style of use” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 100) for streamers traversing the geographies of nation-states and the lands of copyright holders throughout the Internet. These “third-party unsanctioned streaming” (Burroughs & Rugg, 2014) sites are temporary alliances—not cohesive online communities, which are reliant on the cunning of users. This research attends to the uses of streaming, larger reception practices, discourses, and the aesthetic moments of unsanctioned streaming despite this ephemerality.

For the purposes of this paper, streaming is defined through de Certeau’s (1984) framework of strategies and tactics. Streaming is framed as both a tactic for audiences and an emergent strategic logic by industry. For audiences, streaming works tactically as content that people pull, as
networked individuals have access to seemingly ubiquitous streams of content available through unsanctioned third party indexing and hosting sites online. However, for industry, this same tactical practice is reincorporated into industry strategies in the form of Netflix and other sanctioned streaming sites. This paper attends to the tactical cunning of third party unsanctioned streaming.

This emphasis on strategies and tactics is informed by Rick Altman’s (2004) conception of “crisis historiography.” Altman argues that every “new” media technology goes through a process of negotiation where the “definition of a representational technology is both historically and socially contingent” (Altman, 2004, p. 16, emphasis in original). The end uses of technology are completely unknown as “new media, when they first emerge, pass through a phase of identity crisis, a crisis precipitated at least by the uncertain status of the given medium in relation to established, known media and their functions” (Pingree & Gitelman, 2003, p. xii). Streaming is also in the midst of an “identity crisis” with the negotiation between strategies and tactics. Allen-Robertson (2013, p. 187) views illicit networks as playing an invaluable role in developing the contemporary digital media industry, “The shift to digital distribution in the contemporary cultural industries was driven by the conflict between the market of illegitimate distribution networks and the incumbent rights-holder industries.” Piracy is often a progenitor of industry incorporation. Allen-Robertson (2013, p. 187) goes so far as to state that without “the illicit networks’ innovations and dedication the contemporary digital media market would not exist today.” Unsanctioned streaming stands in conjunction with sanctioned streaming as both a productive and disruptive media practice.

The paper first looks at the attempts by the MPAA to discursively construe unsanctioned streaming as deviant or “rogue.” I argue that this ubiquitous practice is central to the debates surrounding SOPA and PIPA. Next, the analytic distinction between BitTorrent downloading communities and streaming alliances is proposed, along with an explanation of the differences between hosting and indexing sites in unsanctioned streaming. This form of streaming is then theorized as a tactic through the work of Michel de Certeau, as opposed to a strategy, which invites users to scrape the surface of popular culture. Finally, streaming is theorized as discursive and aesthetic enactments of mobility and materiality, jouissance, and playing the role of the trickster.

**SOPA and the MPAA**

On October 26th, 2011 Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) introduced into Congress bill H.R. 3261, the “Stop Online Piracy Act” (SOPA) (Congress.gov, 2011). In the press release from the Committee on the Judiciary, Representative Smith stated, “The Stop Online Piracy Act helps stop the flow of revenue to rogue websites and ensures that the profits from American innovations go to American innovators” (Committee on the Judiciary, 2011). The term “rogue websites” became part of the public relations strategy employed by advocates of the bill who wanted to make Internet companies and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) liable for the posting of infringing content. SOPA was followed by a sister piece of legislation the Protect IP Act (PIPA).

Supporters of the bill, most notably the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), cited the need to protect intellectual property and the purported billions of dollars lost to piracy from these so-called “rogue websites.” Writing in *Forbes*, political analyst and Fox News contributor Doug Schoen (2012, para. 12) expressed concern for “IP intensive industries” that he claims contribute “$7.7 trillion to the economy every year.” According to Schoen (2012, para. 2), “the bill’s staunchest critics had to
recognize that illegal “rogue” websites undermine American intellectual property and threaten economic growth and dynamism.” Opponents of the bill such as Harvard University constitutional law professor Laurence Tribe (2011, p. 4) claimed SOPA would harm emergent technology companies, undermining “the openness and free exchange of information at the heart of the Internet”, which would be a violation of the First Amendment.

The bill would have granted the United States government the authority to permanently blacklist foreign infringing websites rather than relying on the DMCA takedown system. The responsibility for monitoring infringing content would shift from the copyright holder making a claim to the Internet Service Providers (ISPs), web browsers, and the Internet companies themselves (this would still not shield the companies from frivolous infringing claims from rival companies and competitors). Google and other prominent technology companies called the bill “censorship” as the tech companies banded together on January 18th, 2012 to “blackout” the Internet as a collective act of protest. Other prominent participating sites included Twitter, Amazon, Craigslist, Reddit, Pinterest, Wordpress, Wikipedia, and Mozilla among many more. An estimated 1 billion people saw the blacked out protest messages, with “4 top-10, 13 top-100 US sites, and 115,000 small and medium sites” participating in the strike (Fight for the Future, 2012).

This is an important moment in the history of unsanctioned third-party streaming because it shows the extent to which the MPAA and RIAA wanted to stop the ubiquitous practice of streaming amongst audiences. The majority of media reporting pointed to the infamous The Pirate Bay BitTorrent site as the quintessential “rogue website” example. While this website and other torrenting sites were definitely in the crosshairs of the media industry lobby and the MPAA, the websites which are the site of study for this research were equally—if not more—the target of the industry. In a letter from the MPAA (2011, p. 2) addressed to the Office of the Unites States Trade Representative on the same day the SOPA bill was introduced, the organization outlines three different “rogue” or “online notorious markets” who threaten the “livelihoods of the people who give [the motion picture industry] life.” This letter provides keen insight into how the industry understands and codifies streaming. The MPAA letter provides a brief history of content theft, which begins with small private networks in the 1990s and moves to more centralized peer-to-peer (P2P) technologies (Napster) and then de-centered protocols (BitTorrent).

This message from the MPAA permits a glimpse into new and growing industry concerns that have augmented the purported threat posed by these earlier forms of piracy. “Today the online market has further fragmented and content thieves are taking advantage of new online technologies, with streaming sites and infringing download and streaming hubs representing a growing share of unlawful conduct” (MPAA, 2011, p. 2). The document goes on to specifically mention “linking sites,” which are the searchable content archives of third party streaming. “Moreover, a secondary market has arisen in the form of ‘linking sites,’ which are professional-looking sites that facilitate content theft by indexing stolen movie and television content hosted on other sites” (MPAA, 2011, p. 2). Three infringing categories are identified by the MPAA:

1. Peer-to-Peer Networks and Torrent Portals. The sites listed here are some of the more famous torrenting sites like Thepiratebay.org (TPB), currently thepiratebay.to, and Torrentz.eu. These sites allow users to directly download files onto their computers through torrent technologies that disperse large data files across the network.
2. Infringing Download and Streaming Hubs. These sites are often referred to as “cyberlockers” or hosting websites. The MPAA lists Megaupload.com or Megavideo.com, Putlocker.com, Wupload.com, Simdisk.co.kr, and VKontakte as some of the most predominant infringing sites. A site like Megavideo received an estimated 4.6 million unique visitors per month, according to the MPAA. These sites rarely remain under the same domain name and have changed dramatically since 2011 (if they remain at all). As the MPAA succinctly explains, the “user uploads a file and the hosting site provides the uploader with a link to that file. Clicking the link will either initiate a download of the uploaded file, a stream of the uploaded file or offer both options” (MPAA, 2011, p. 5). What is complicated about hosting sites is that they are used for infringing and non-infringing purposes. This form of cloud storage is increasingly important for users and businesses.

3. Linking Websites. These websites give hosting sites a degree of plausible deniability. The sites operate by providing users a rudimentary search function to browse content (most often just by title, season, and episode). The sites, then, “aggregate, organize and index links to files stored on other sites” (p. 6). These other sites would be the hosting sites listed above. Prominent sites listed by the MPAA include Video2k.tv (a derivative of Kino.to), Letmewatchthis.ch, Movie2k.to, Seriesyonkis.com, and 3000filmes.com. These sites are in even greater flux than hosting sites and will be taken down and pop back up under different country codes frequently.

Again, while The Pirate Bay received the bulk of the media attention and scrutiny, the MPAA was building its case against hosting websites or cyberlockers. Less than a week after the introduction of the SOPA bill, the MPAA released a “fact sheet” titled, “It’s All About the Money: The ‘Business’ Model of Rogue Cyberlockers.” The “rogue websites” are clearly connected to the practice of unsanctioned third-party streaming. Kevin Suh, the MPAA’s senior vice president of content protection, is quoted in CNET (Sandoval, 2012) as saying, MegaUpload "was at the very top of the piracy pyramid." Citing an Envisional report (2011), the MPAA claims, “Estimates show that 73.2% of non-pornographic cyberlocker site traffic is copyrighted content being downloaded illegally.” Hosting sites are characterized as a “serious and growing threat” to media industries.

Just a few months later Paramount Pictures released a graphic of the top six file hosting websites surrounding a globe with Megaupload crossed off. The caption reads, “The top 5 rogue cyberlockers receive 41 billion page views yearly...that’s over 5 views for every person on the planet” (TorrentFreak, 2012). Megaupload was crossed off the list because, on January 19th, founder Kim Dotcom had been arrested at his residence in New Zealand, the company shut down, and his assets frozen. The MPAA was looking for more prosecution and the passage of SOPA to help enable the shutting down of these streaming websites.

Why all of this industry upheaval and collusion with the FBI and government officials—just to stop people clicking on pop-up soft-core porn ads, streaming movies, and television? All of this depicts an industry acutely aware of streaming media as a larger cultural practice of cunning, a tactic, which momentarily bucks up against the strategic logic of media industries.

A Note on Methodology

As previously stated, unsanctioned streaming sites are impermanent nodes and exist as tactical, ephemeral spaces within digital media. Thus, this article relies on participant-observation, textual
analysis, and self-reflexivity to study this transient space. In following Morley’s (1992, p. 13) view that “questions of methodology” are “ultimately pragmatic ones”, I recognize the limitations of my own positioning. However, I am still attending to the uses of streaming in everyday life and larger reception practices of unsanctioned streaming despite this ephemerality. This research stems from a larger multi-sited ethnographic study (Burroughs, 2015), wherein I have conducted participant observation within the hosting and indexing sites listed in the MPAA report on “rogue sites” from the years 2012-2014.

Unsanctioned Third Party Streaming

Following the typology of first and third party sanctioned and unsanctioned streaming proposed by Burroughs and Rugg (2014), this paper focuses on third party unsanctioned streaming as part of what the authors describe as “streaming culture.” Third party unsanctioned streaming is the ubiquitous streaming of content such as movies and television digitally from third party hosting and indexing sites that do not have licensing agreements with copyright holders. These websites are often divided into two separate, yet interrelated types of sites—those that host the streaming content and indexing sites that provide links to the hosting websites. The two sets of sites work in tandem. Rarely is it possible to simply type a search query into a search engine and retrieve a desired streaming video from a cyberlocker. Back in 2008, when I wanted to watch content, however, I easily logged onto a computer, opened up a browser, and searched on Google for the name of content with the word streaming, stream, or some similar derivative. This connected me to indexing sites that then connected to the hosting sites. Hosting sites don’t often have a searchable database, which means that I can’t just go to the homepage of a cyberlocker like Sockshare.com and find the unsanctioned content. There is no search function. This is the role of indexing sites. Hosting sites do release a link to content when someone uploads a file. These are the links that are then posted on indexing sites that grant direct access to unsanctioned content.

Around 2010, with the ramping up of DMCA takedown notices and increased MPAA scrutiny, it was harder to use search engines and unsanctioned streamers needed to know the names of the specific sites. The searching of content expanded to multiple mediated platforms. I used Twitter to search for links to sports games because some indexing sites such as Vipbox started their own Twitter accounts, which would tweet out links to games (unfortunately many of these accounts did not last but frequently you could still find desired content on Twitter). Reddit message boards and subreddits (such as r/BestOfStreamingVideo and /r/cordcutters) devoted to specific hosting and indexing sites were another substantial source of access to content.

As Lobato and Tang (2014, p. 426) outline, the “cyberlocker constitutes the backend of a larger infrastructure that includes release logs, bulletin boards and forums, where links to cyberlocker-hosted content can be found.” This means that the indexing sites serve the search function to get access to the content. “Cyberlockers are the storage workhorses of this system; intermediary sites are where users navigate the potentially vast content available” (Lobato & Tang, 2014, p. 426). This is done to try and protect each party by compartmentalizing each step (raising complicated questions about cloud computing and copyright, for example). Justin.tv was an early version of a streaming site (quickly stripped of “illegal,” copyright infringing content), which was replaced with links and third party hosting sites like Megavideo, Putlocker or Sockshare (see Bruns, 2009, for a longer discussion on the contribution of Justin.tv to the rise of streaming).
The Motion Picture Association of America defines streaming as a sub-category of “Content Theft” labeled “Streaming Theft.” The MPAA anticipates some of the objections to this categorization of streaming as theft (references to advertising and subscriptions) and tries to give “tips” to the public on how to avoid fraud and theft:

While there are many websites where consumers can legally view streamed content, there are many illegal streaming sites where operators will solicit users to provide payment to purchase "subscriptions" or "memberships" or otherwise pay for illegal content. These sites often feature advertisements for legitimate products or services alongside illegal streaming of unauthorized movie and television content. Website operators of such illegal sites purposely use these techniques to fool consumers into believing that their websites are legal; that’s how they make a profit. It’s called fraud and theft. (2012)

We are admonished to “watch for titles that are ‘too new to be true,’” “trust your eyes and ears” in reference to picture quality, and to avoid websites that don’t disclose their location in contact information or who promise to be “100% legal.” Consumers are being duped into paying these websites, but the greater harm is that many start to believe that the widespread practice is a legitimate part of everyday consumption patterns. From the industry’s perspective, this kind of unsanctioned streaming should be defined as nothing more than streaming theft. In my experience, indexing and hosting sites do appear as legitimate businesses. I have used hosting sites, not just for infringing content, but to send large data files transnationally. This doesn’t happen “alongside” unsanctioned streaming but is part of the networked architecture of hosting sites, an example of streaming existing within the interstices of production and consumption.

Streaming is the latest iteration of users’ cunning and subversion of state power. Yet streamers are not actively resisting or usurping state authority but are engaging in an ephemeral, momentary bucking of state strategies, which lockdown copyright as supposedly timeless. However, this is an important moment because it marks a potential shift in the cultural imaginary (Boddy, 2004) of Internet users as a space for re-contextualizing thinking about ownership and copyright in a streaming society.

**Downloading versus Streaming**

Goldsmith and Wu (2005) in their book, *Who Controls the Internet*, end their analysis with the onset of BitTorrent and communities of Internet users who are able to circumvent state control but are isolated from any kind of mainstream cultural impact. These communities are left in the literature as ostracized, niche groups that subsist on the fringes of Internet life. This research makes a contribution to this literature by extending the focus to the ubiquitous practice of third party unsanctioned streaming. There is a great deal of consideration in the popular press and amongst media scholars about P2P file sharing and BitTorrent, but significantly less scholarly attention placed on streaming. Substantive debates surrounding intellectual property and file-sharing (Benkler, 2006; Boyle, 2008; Gillespie, 2007; Lessig, 2002, 2004, 2006; McLeod, 2005; Vaidhyanathan, 2003, 2011) and the economics of piracy and file-sharing (Liebowitz, 2006; Rob & Waldfogel, 2008; Zentner, 2006) with the rise of networked communication are well trodden academic ground. Articles from a critical cultural perspective, as opposed to a legal vantage point, often incorporate ethnographic or quasi-ethnographic approaches that consider the field of study.
(Kelty, 2008; Soderberg, 2011). Scholars from a media anthropology trajectory read the collective community through participation, embeddedness, and reading message boards (the “data” of choice is the message board post that succinctly supports the author’s claims).


However, some scholars challenge the notion that file-sharing constitutes a “community” (Holmstrom, 2014). Andersson (2011) succinctly describes file-sharing as “the unrestricted duplication of digitized media content between autonomous end-nodes on the Internet” (p. 2). Caraway (2012) looks at debates amongst users about the varying degrees and types of community present in file-sharing. This is in contrast to streaming (or cyberlocker hosting sites), which according to Lobato and Tang are not reciprocal (encouraging both uploading and downloading) or collaborative:

But arguably its most egregious feature, from the perspective of current Web 2.0 discourse, is the fact that the cyberlocker does not foster collaboration or co-creation; its storage-and-retrieval functionality means there is no possibility of textual change for the content hosted on its servers. (2014, p. 431)

For the purposes of this research, I draw an analytic distinction between P2P, file-sharing, and streaming. Streaming alliances scrape the surface of popular culture, whereas BitTorrent communities are inconspicuous and require more technological knowledge. BitTorrent protocols require separate applications for uploading and downloading while hosting sites just need an Internet connection and browser to access content. Another marked difference is the seeding process in BitTorrent communities that creates more social cohesion and reciprocity in torrenting. “P2P communities, by contrast, are subject to the whim of users’ seeding capabilities, that is, making the file available only when the user wants to spare the bandwidth” (emphasis original, Marx, 2013, para. 14). In contrast, content on unsanctioned streaming sites is always-already available in the minds of streamers. Content just needs to be hunted down, but there is no necessary collaboration to initiate the retrieval, no seeding. A study by Mahanti, Carlsson, and Williamson (2010) finds that with the decline of P2P file sharing that prominent hosting sites offer faster access to popular television content, which is spread more widely than P2P counterpart communities. This is important for the application of participant observation to streaming networks as “temporary alliances” (Wildeman, 1998) or temporary collectives. In scraping the surface streaming, as a tactic, acts as a liminal space, which ephemerally studs user’s everyday lives with encounters of mediated content.

Strategies and Tactics: The Cunning of Reading and Streaming
This section begins by defining streaming within de Certeau’s (1984) model of tactics versus strategies before moving on to further methodological justifications. Streaming is then placed within an active audience perspective as productive “reading” and as a liminal space of aesthetic moments and temporary alliances. This is followed by an analysis of indexing and hosting websites involved in streaming. Strategies and tactics are a useful conceptual framework for understanding streaming. “Strategy” is defined as the “calculus of force-relationships” where the possessor of power exercises the “will and power” over an environment to assume a place that is sanctioned as proper (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Fiske (1988, p. 288) succinctly explains place as the “mastery over time, allowing one to hold on to acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions and to control historical changes to one’s own advantage.” Tactics have no sustained place of their own but construct a space within the place of the powerful.

Tactics depend on time, are contextual, and belong to the weak. They cannot keep what they win and must consistently manipulate “events in order to turn them into opportunities” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). We might think of a park as a strategy by a local government to wield control over a space and make it appear as if time has been suspended. Cutting a corner or walking through the grass in the park might be thought of as a momentary, ephemeral tactic. There is the subversion of authority but not in the way that we traditionally think of compiling the gains of resistance. This is “making do” as streaming within the logics of a Western capitalist system of copyright and ownership.

Streamers are not passive users of the Internet but are active producers or bricoleurs. De Certeau (1984) emphasizes the generative creativity of users within the repetition of everydayness. For de Certeau, consumption and production are interstitial processes—consumption as production. Understanding de Certeau’s concept of “reading” is of seminal importance for asserting the active role of streamers as bricoleurs. Rather than passively consuming programmed content, streamers as bricoleurs participate in the recombinatory practice of collecting popular culture artifacts when and where they want. Thus, our normative conception of consumers as passive readers, a view held by many in the Frankfurt school, is deeply embedded in our relation to a scriptural economy according to de Certeau. Writing for de Certeau is strategic and the strategy of those in power, like the Church, that resembles a sender-receiver model where the consumers are “imprinted by and like the text which is imposed on it.” In this way, it produces:

The ideology of consumption-as-a-receptacle...this legend is necessary for the system that distinguishes and privileges authors, educators, revolutionaries, in a word, ‘producers,’ in contrast with those who do not consume. By challenging ‘consumption as it is conceived and (of course) confirmed by these ‘authorial’ enterprises, we may be able to discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists (1984, p. 167).

De Certeau is flipping the script and inviting scholars to take consumption practices seriously. This also pushes back against the “author genius” discourse, which dates back to the dissolution of the guild system and implementation of copyright to protect individual productions and works of art—further reducing the generative creativity of consumption. An entire tradition of active audience researchers would follow this novel theory of reading as production and its decentering of privileged producers (or writers) of knowledge.

only take popular culture seriously as a site of academic investigation but also to consider the voices of those participating in the reading. De Certeau (1984, p. 169) understands reading as a re-combinatory practice of being in-between where:

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author’s position. He invents in texts something different from what they intended. He detaches them from their origin. He combines their fragments and creates something unknown in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings. Is this reading activity reserved for the literary critic...or can it be extended to all cultural consumers?

This practice of combining fragments of popular culture and detaching content from their media industry origins makes this form of consumption meaningful, a re-combinatory craft. Streaming can be seen as the latest extension of this tension between consumers and media industries where media consumers are not:

Totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries. It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter in the new knowledge culture (Jenkins, 2006, p. 136).

Streaming is polysemic practice and cunning, which stands in-between—not completely autonomous, but not completely vulnerable—as a tactic.

A return to de Certeau (1984, pp. 156-157) means a “poetics of uses rather than users” and an analysis “peopled with moments and practices rather than subjects”, which might correct for some of the over-fixation on resistant, active audience readings of Madonna and MTV music videos, proliferant in the nineties. No longer is the overarching imperative to search for revolution and an alternative to the current capitalist consumer culture, according to de Certeau and Fiske. The knowledge produced by the researcher “may be used in a number of ways, and it is important to understand here that what is produced is a knowledge, not the knowledge” (Fiske 1988, p. 305, emphasis in original). De Certeau is beginning from the contextual and as a pragmatist; he wants to deal with culture as lived experiences in and through capitalism. Streaming operates in the same way as a contingent practice of “making do” in contemporary consumer culture.

Mobility and Materiality

Another important way that streaming, as a tactic, challenges the “place” of copyright and entertainment conglomerates is by contesting the “place and the timing of scheduled uses” of commercial content that for Fiske (2010, p. 34) is the strategy of commerce. This strategy of commerce works through broadcast scheduling that routinized viewing habits and establishes the place of television programming. Viewers are even given names for various line-ups of shows to demarcate days of the week and blocks of times for weekly viewing. Commercials are a part of the established norms of television watching despite the newness of their number and length. Streaming allows the user to watch programs according to their own timeframe and schedule. While television companies and stations are emphasizing live viewing through new technologies
such as Twitter, streaming is a momentary bucking of that strategy of commerce to lock down viewers. This allows streamers to think about television and consumption beyond the network schedule.

Streamers often describe having entirely different viewing experiences by watching an entire season of a show in one or two binge viewing sessions (that are commercial free!). Binging (a colloquially used term that has been adopted by industry and popular culture) is a tactic because it does nothing to change the official structure of television nor does it even register within official Nielsen statistics and stockpile its winnings, yet, unsanctioned streaming is the art of the weak. Fiske (1988, p. 289) understands this “weak” employment of tactics as “constantly mobile, seizing possibilities on the wing, deriving from the eternal, unsuppressed vigilance of the weak but undefeated in spirit.” This mobility is part of the streaming tactic. Not only can you watch when you want but with the portability of technology—where you want as well. The place of the TV in the home must be rethought because of the many different devices and configurations for viewing facilitated by streaming. An annual NPD Group (2012) study reported that 45% of those surveyed use their television as the “primary screen” for watching free and paid streaming videos, up from 33% in 2011. The study suggests that this is due to the fact that “home installation of millions of Internet-connected TVs is changing the way that consumers access and view streaming video” (NPD, 2012). So as portability is a force de-centering traditional television, streaming is becoming a more dominant mode for consuming all mediated content.

Fan studies in the first wave or “fandom is beautiful” stage “constituted a purposeful political intervention that sided with the tactics of fan audiences in their evasion of dominant ideologies, and that set out to rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by non-fans” (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, p. 2). Poaching and subverting the preferred meaning of the “power bloc” (Fiske, 1989) was a communal display of resistance to dominant ideologies. Streaming can be a moment of active audience resistance and certainly is a moment of “reading” popular culture, but this is increasingly a negotiated space “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1987) audience and industry. The difference is that streaming is performed by the networked individual while fandom has more of a communal ethos. Fan communities, as well as many other participatory cultures, engage in a kind of reclamation project for their valued cultural artifacts and content. In contrast, streaming culture produces a distinct orientation to ownership where the networked individual feels less inclined to own the materiality of content. Returning to the move from flow to files back to flow—even the desire to download content gives way to the implicit trust or faith that streamers have in the ability to access content through the network. The materiality of libraries, DVDs, and CD collections all migrate into a streaming culture.

**Jouissance**

In an otherwise foundational piece on unsanctioned streaming, Lobato and Tang (2014, p. 432) believe the non-reciprocal nature of hosting sites (cyberlockers) makes the technology beyond romanticizing, “we will watch with interest to see how the remnants of the industry evolve and how future generations of media scholars will reconstruct the story of this unloved and unlovely technology.” It is true that hosting and indexing sites do not elicit the same kinds of responses from free culture advocates as BitTorrent communities like The Pirate Bay, but from the context of the user experience streaming is not unloved. On the contrary, unsanctioned third-party streaming
permits users to indulge in a cathartic, liminal release from the everydayness of modernity. The ubiquitous form of unsanctioned streaming gives rise to the re-articulation of streaming as an emergent industry. Companies such as Netflix and Amazon are direct benefactors from piracy and the informal media economy (Lobato & Thomas, 2012) (once again, proving Sterne (2012) is correct that pirate practices quickly become incorporated into business practices) and should not go “unloved” by the emergent streaming industry.

De Certeau (1984, p. 37) examined the distinction between revolutions and lived contextual resistance, which can be applied to streaming. De Certeau believes that those using tactics “must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected.” Modernity routinizes commodity and leisure as leisure is reinforced and constituted through capitalism (think of a cell phone issued by a business to stay in constant contact or emails from students on the weekends). The technological continuation of the commodification of leisure results in the inability to escape work as you are constantly connected (the double-edged sword of connectivity). De Certeau’s view of culture perceives cracks and fissures in modernity that allow for the fleeting promise of everyday life to puncture modernity’s absence with the presence and pleasure of jouissance. This could be a worker quickly checking a Facebook profile or streaming a video to feel that fleeting sense of jouissance studding modern life (Silverstone, 1994).

Far from seeing streaming as harmful, lonely, and depressing (see Sung, Kang, and Lee, 2015, for an example of media effects scholarship on the purported negative impacts of binging), streamers within the context of third party unsanctioned streaming find jouissance within the fissures of modernity and copyright. De Certeau (1984, p. 135) invites researchers to rethink the project of revolution, which can minimize contingent, agonistic struggle. “Revolution itself, that ‘modern’ idea, represents that scriptural project at the level of an entire society seeking to constitute itself as a blank page with respect to the past, to write itself by itself (that is, to produce itself as its own system) and to produce a new history on the model of what it fabricates (and this will be ‘progress’).” The focus of this research then is not on how streaming is “revolutionizing” the strategic logic of media industries but interrogating streaming as a meaningful tactic of cunning, which becomes an interstitial part of everyday media life.

**Trickster**

Movie2k.to is back as Movie4k! Nobody should have the power to suppress somebody just because of money! This site is the result of the need of many Human Beings. Everyone wants Movie2k.to/Movie4k.to back. We, the Citizens, have to make clear that a “copyright infringement” cannot be compared to a violent crime. How come bootlegger get five years of jail time while child abuser are free on a 22-month probation? That is because money is way more important than an uniqü (sic) human life. You cannot suppress the will of the People! One website gös (sic), the next day five new appear. Did not the time come to overthink your marketing concepts and accept the new media? (Movies2k.to, 2014)

The above quote is from one of the MPAA listed indexing sites. This is a rare occasion when the site administrators make any kind of public announcement to users of the site. This message is addressed to both government institutions and users of the site at the same time. Related to jouissance, the message exemplifies the role of the trickster being played by streamers. Klapp
(1954) defines tricksters as the “clever hero,” whereas Turner (1969) describes tricksters as liminal personalities. Horvath and Thomassen (2008, p. 13) extend this conception of liminal trickster—adding that tricksters are without home (place), outsiders, and lack existential commitments. Tricksters, like streamers, are “ambivalent characters. They have no respect for boundaries or for neat and tidy categories” (McArthur, 2000, p. 85). For some streamers, as they dip into the liminal space of streaming, they enact the role of the trickster-subverting the boundaries of popular culture and copyright. This is an affective rush of momentarily breaking established norms. However, it is not the case for all streamers. There are many who may not feel at all like they are blurring boundaries or engaged in anything nefarious. However, as the above quote shows, those who do perform this role wear the banner of the trickster. They enact this aesthetic moment by dipping into the shallow trough of streaming media, rolling around in the content—only to freely exit back into everyday life.

With my own young family, I have noticed a migration away from unsanctioned streaming as my dominant and preferred method of consuming content. I succumb to the convenience of search algorithms rather than the jouissance of treasure hunting. Yet, even as I assimilate into the rearticulated flow of an emergent streaming industry, I still play the trickster. I watch Netflix from my wife’s sister’s account, Amazon Prime from my parents, XFinity by using my brother’s cable login and Hulu Plus from a free promotion. I continue to push back and “make do” by scavenging for passwords, manipulating technology, and leveraging my network connections (I am still in search of an elusive HBOGo or HBO Now password).

The entertainment industry makes a great deal of their money from controlling large libraries of content. The business model is to sell that library back to the consumer in as many forms as possible (for example only “owning” a song as a licensed rental on one playing device such as an iPod that is legally non-transferable to another device), so control over content is paramount. Companies want to lock down consumers in a timeless place that naturalizes copyright law so that it seems like it has existed forever and will continue to exist forever. This strategic logic is a relatively new assertion that works of art should belong to companies beyond the life of the author or creator but thanks to the panoptic practice of the Sonny Bono law (officially the Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act but the colloquially known Sonny Bono law serves to put a happy, clean, eternal/dead face to its existence) the life of copyright has been extended and effectively has frozen in place the public domain. Streaming allows the user to journey through popular culture and cut corners through retrofitting content to the contours of their own cultural imaginaries. The user does not own the fragments of popular culture; they are streamed, and so the user exists in-between with no definitive place. Despite this placelessness, there is the capacity for a multiplicity of readings and combinations of programming. This is the surprise and productivity of poaching and reading within popular culture through streaming.

Sites for streaming are constantly in flux. Streamers are negotiating pop-ups, dead links, and seizing the ephemeral moments of watching a particular program. These sites are not built to last, and takedowns are often the order of the day, so the fleeting pleasure in the pursuit and momentary viewing are part of the undefeated spirit of streaming. Here we could go so far as to say that within the history of streaming, from Napster to Kazaa to our current moment, there exists a larger discursive orientation to streaming amongst those who have grown up downloading and streaming content (this history could be extended to include VHS swapping or other forms of participatory culture). While the use of torrent technology is still very specialized and not as accessible as unsanctioned streaming, there is an internalization to streaming as a practice that
drives me to “make do” and find the content as if it is a part of a game between me and the content controlling industry. I feel I am playing the role of the trickster.

Conclusion

This research is an analysis of third-party unsanctioned streaming and the forces that impinge on this practice. On the one hand, streaming is presented by the MPAA as piracy and the spaces involved branded as “rogue websites.” On the other, unsanctioned streaming is conceptualized as a tactical practice, divided into linking and hosting sites, which both satisfies user needs and is a source of cultural and economic innovation. Efforts by institutions, such as the MPAA, and scholars to raise these competing discourses to ascendancy are chronicled. Ultimately this analysis has yielded a series of insights: streaming has had dramatic impact on the mobility and materiality of media flow; streaming is a process that leads to aesthetic experiences (jouissance), and streamers both assume and are cast in the role of the trickster.

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Dazzles, Decoys, and Deities: The Janus Face of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks
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Over the past few years a growing number of artists have critiqued the ubiquity of identity recognition technologies. Specifically, the use of these technologies by state security programs, tech-giants and multinational corporations has met with opposition and controversy. A popular form of resistance to recognition technology is sought in strategies of masking and camouflage. Zach Blas, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin and Adam Harvey are among a group of internationally acclaimed artists who have developed subversive anti-facial recognition masks that disrupt identification technologies. This paper examines the ontological underpinnings of these popular and widely exhibited mask projects. Over and against a binary understanding and criticism of identity recognition technology, I propose to take a relational turn to reimagine these technologies not as an object for our eyes, but as a relationship between living organisms and things. A relational perspective cuts through dualist and anthropocentric conceptions of recognition technology opening pathways to intersectional forms of resistance and critique. Moreover, if human-machine relationships are to be understood as coming into being in mutual dependency, if the boundaries between online and offline are always already blurred, if the human and the machine live intertwined lives and it is no longer clear where the one stops and the other starts, we need to revise our understanding of the self. A relational understanding of recognition technology moves away from a notion of the self as an isolated and demarcated entity in favour of an understanding of the self as relationally connected, embedded and interdependent. This could alter the way we relate to machines and multiplies the lines of flight we can take out of a culture of calculated settings.

It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality – V. Woolf

We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die – W.H. Auden

Introduction

Facial recognition technology enables the algorithmic recognition of faces. It is used in drones, in CCTV cameras in cities, at airports and borders, on the subway and online. Facebook, for example, uses recognition technology for its photo-tagging service. But recognition technology can also be employed to detect and link all sorts of objects, such as automatic number plate recognition, and the tracking of people’s movement and the collection of data via telematics, apps and sensors. The use of these technologies by state security programs, tech-giants and multinational corporations has been met with opposition. An “anti-facial recognition movement is on the rise,” writes Joseph Cox (2014) for The Kernel. While it is a bit premature to call it a “movement,” over the past few years a
growing number of artists and activists have expressed concern about the ubiquitous implementation and dissemination of facial and identity recognition technologies.

Recognition technology is evasive. For one, its operational mechanisms cannot be observed at work, as it runs on algorithmic routines that are largely invisible, not in the least because of the secrecy surrounding algorithms used by tech giants. Furthermore, the high speed at which these software programs calculate make them ungraspable to humans. Therefore, a critique of algorithmic computing requires imagination; it entails visualizing what is only partly visible. The artists and technologists Zach Blas, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin and Adam Harvey have developed trickster-like, subversive anti-facial recognition camouflage masks as a form of contesting this type of technology. These masked interventions express an ambiguous relation to data capturing technologies within what is often called an “Age of the Machine” and an increasingly “informational,” “datafied,” and “softwarized” society with an “algorithmic culture” (Braman, 2009; Berry, 2014). The masked interventions by which these critics position themselves, give shape to and are shaped by debates on algorithmic routines. Debates on facial recognition are often conceptualized mainly in political-economic, legal or technological terms; the ontological underpinnings of sociotechnical imaginaries of facial recognition technology are not systematically interrogated, especially when these take the form of critical artistic interventions, such as mask designs.

Borrowing from Sheila Jasanoff (2015) I understand sociotechnical imaginaries to be publicly held, community-dependent, semi-stabilized and publicly performed visions of sociotechnical developments. Sociotechnical imaginaries get re-enacted, repeated, revalidated and become more or less socialized in cultural processes through which they are made more or less robust in order to need less explication within specific communities (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4). In what follows below, I explore how sociotechnical imaginaries of facial recognition technology are imagined through an analysis of the mask designs of Zach Blas, Leo Selvaggio, Sterling Crispin and Adam Harvey. These mask projects have been on display at numerous exhibitions in Europe and the UK and the artists have received a good deal of media attention from international outlets. The critical intervention of these four artists and technologists arises from an anxiety about the state of the self vis-à-vis its sociotechnical environment. This raises the question of what underlying logic of the human self and its sociotechnical environment then leads these critical voices to opt for disappearing from view? Why take the route of concealment strategies by way of masking their faces?

The Rise of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks

Camouflage, as Hanna Rose Shell (2012, p. 10) notes in *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*, is a way of “not showing up,” to appear to disappear, to recede in the background, to become invisible. Camouflage, Shell writes, shows us how we look at the world.
Let us consider four acclaimed identity recognition technology distorting interventions. For his URME Personal Surveillance Identity Prosthetic (2012) the artist Leo Selvaggio developed a wearable prosthetic mask of his face. Made from pigmented hard resin, using 3D printing technology and identity replacement technology, this mask is a 3D rendition of Selvaggio’s facial features such as skin tone, texture and hair (URME Surveillance, 2012). Selvaggio explains: “Rather than hide from cameras, simply give them a face other than your own to track without drawing attention to yourself in a crowd” (URME Surveillance, 2012). Selvaggio explains that he feels “an overwhelming urge to protect the public from this surveillance state” (URME Surveillance, 2012). He understands recognition technology to be a form of “inspection.” As a counter-move to these inspective technologies, he offers his own identity as a “decoy,” and a “defense technology” (URME Surveillance, 2012).
Artist and scholar Zach Blas’ series of mask projects are designed to, on the one hand, visualize how identity recognition technology analyses human faces, and to resist identity recognition technology by offering undetectable face masks. His series of 3D metal objects, called Face Cage, materialises the strong contrast between facial forms and biometric mathematical diagrams to visualize how identity recognition software reads a human face. His Facial Weaponization Suite is a series of community workshops, geared at LGBT and minority groups, that produces amorphous masks that by virtue of their form and cryptographic material will not be recognized as a face by identity recognition software. Identity recognition technology, as Blas sees it, “control[s] through an optical logic of making visible” to “police and criminalize populations all over the world” (Blas, 2014). His masks represent a resistance to what he calls “informatic visibility” which is reducing us to mere “aggregates of data” (Blas, 2014). The aim of these masks is to become “a faceless threat” by providing “opacity”—a concept he derived from the poet Édouard Glissant (Blas, 2014).
Technologist and artist Adam Harvey tries a different tack. His CV Dazzle (2010) uses analogue camouflage to thwart face detection technology. “Dazzle” refers to a type of camouflage-patterned painting used in WWI on warships. The stripes and bold colours of this technique disrupt the outline of a ship and make it difficult to estimate a ship’s size, range and direction, preventing the enemy from targeting it. Harvey’s CV (computer vision) Dazzle uses similar facial camouflage designs. He writes: “since facial-recognition algorithms rely on the identification and spatial relationship of key facial features, like symmetry and tonal contours, one can block detection by creating an ‘anti-face’” (Harvey, 2010). Harvey (2014) compares the effect of recognition technology to “knowing somebody could be watching...you always have a chaperone”.

Fig. 3 CV Dazzle by Adam Harvey (2010)
The Data-Masks of the artist and technologist Sterling Crispin have been produced by reverse engineering facial recognition algorithms. His face masks are 3D printed masks that visualize what robust models’ recognition and detection algorithms recognize and detect as a face—what passes as a face online. They “show the machine what it’s looking for,” holding up a mirror to the machine (Crispin, 2014). These Data-Masks are “animistic deities, brought out of the algorithmic spirit-world of the machine and into our material world, ready to tell us their secrets, or warn us of what’s to come” (Crispin, 2013). Crispin (2014) writes about how we are “always already being seen, watched and analysed” by what he calls a “Technological Other,” that is “peering into our bodies”.

**Imagining Recognition Technology**

Our dependence on images is parasitical; we cannot cope without images, yet they turn on themselves. Which is to say, there is a gap between the world “out there” and the images with which we think to make sense of that world. They are representations, not “re-presences” (Preziosi, 2009, p. 15). Various scholars have pointed out that we therefore need to be critical of classificatory notions and the social imaginaries that are emerging around these technologies (Beer, 2013; Taylor, 2003; boyd & Crawford, 2011).

To mask is to camouflage, a tactic to disappear from view. The question this raises is “from what?” Who is imagined to be watching? Blas, Harvey, Selvaggio and Crispin use visual metaphors to represent facial recognition technology—spies, God-like eyes, Big Brothers, panopticons, and
spectres are ubiquitous. In different ways their masks represent the encounter between the human eye and the alleged mechanical “eye” of identity recognition technology. Or, and more to the point, the encounter between the alleged “eye” of the machine and the “I” that is supposedly being looked at. Such anthropomorphizing of computation has a long history (Wiener, 1988; Reeves and Nass, 1996; Anderson, 2008; Epstein, 2016). Here, this understanding ascribes to recognition technology the transgressive capacity to “peer through your body,” “to follow you,” “to inspect you” and to make you “informatically visible.”

To these critics, visibility finds its counterpoint in invisibility. Blas, Harvey, Selvaggio and Crispin maintain that you can undermine capture technology by becoming imperceptible to it. This invisibility is sought in concealment, in becoming undetectable and unidentifiable to identity recognition technology used in CCTV cameras, both online and offline, by way of camouflage. Kathryn Schulz (2015) writes: “[T]he dream of invisibility is not about attaining power but escaping it.” From what form of domination are they trying to escape? “The world is becoming increasingly surveilled,” Selvaggio (2012) argues in the Indiegogo video he made to seek funding for his masks. “Virtual Shield, a database that has over 25K cameras in Chicago all networked into a single hub, comprises facial recognition software that can track you and pull up all of your corresponding data….There isn’t that much privacy anymore,” Selvaggio (2012) laments. According to Sterling Crispin (2014) “we live under the shadow of a totalitarian police state.” He claims we are “witnessing the rise of a Globally Networked Technological Organism” that will “exceed the human mind,” and that “human[ity] is lost in all this” (Crispin, 2014). For Harvey (2013) the problem is the “imbalance of power between the surveillant and the surveilled [sic].” It is the “ubiquitous and unregulated profiling and cataloguing aspect” of these identification technologies that he considers a threat to privacy (Harvey, 2013). Blas (2014) fears that “the global standards” recognition technology relies on “return us to the classist, racist, sexist scientific endeavours of the 19th century” and lead toward “Total Quantification” annihilating “alterity.” Selvaggio (2012) claims the omnipresence of surveillance technologies affects our relationship to identity. Identity has come to be thought of “as data: highly manipulable [sic], editable, and corruptible.” According to Blas (2014) these technologies “produce a conception of the human as that which is fully measurable, quantifiable and knowable.” Identity is “reduced to disembodied aggregates of data,” he argues (Blas, 2014). Crispin (2014) argues that these networked systems “see human beings as abstract things, patterns, and numbers, not as individual people whose lives matter…. [These systems] define the human as a what, not as a who.” Their masks provide a “fire wall” between the Eye of facial recognition technology and its quantifying, objectifying, commodifying effects.

The utopian dream and idealism projected onto the “cyber world” of the 1990s, the idea of networked media as a free, decentralized, boundless, separate world of infinite possibilities and endless connections, a world in a world, where you could be someone else and act out multiple selves, turned out to be no more than a dream. The vision of computer networks “as vehicles to escape ‘official reality,’ design alternative futures, enhance bodies, and extend minds” (Lovink, 2011, p. 39), a separate space, an autonomous zone with revolutionary potential, has become a relic, outpaced, as Real Life space became ubiquitously networked, centralized, corporatized, appropriated.

In Postscript on the Societies of Control Deleuze (1992, p. 3) argues “individuals have become ‘dividuals,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks.’” Drawing from Deleuze, Adam Morris (2012, p. 7) argues that, engulfed by processes of appropriation and encroached by data clusters as a “method of control,” identity has become a “commodity,” managed by the “two super-institutional
poles of Empire,” namely “surveillance and marketing.” The individual, he argues, functions “as a conduit of wealth” and “a mine of data” to the twin imperatives of marketing and surveillance, which “gives transparency to the fundamental opacity of the population” (Morris, 2012, p. 107). Resistance to this “accumulation of biopolitical information,” with which populations are delineated and managed, can be found in anonymity (Morris, 2012, p. 107). “[H]ide within the silent majority”, “de-activate” oneself as a political and economic subject (Morris, 2012, p. 107). Or, as Alexander Galloway (2008, p. 224) puts it: “we are witnessing a rise in the politicization of absence- and presence- oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance.” Galloway (2008, p. 224) calls this politicization of absence the “black boxing of the self.” The unlimited and unprecedented data gathering and analysis by the state and its corporate consorts brought an end to the utopianism of the early days of cyber culture: anonymity and pseudonymity in a decentralized parallel world outside of the Orwellian institution of the state and its corporations. Online and offline identity is now linked, made visible and trapped in a tracking culture with no exits. The black box becomes an ideal hiding place.

Let us return to the masks. How is “black boxing” connected to the masking of the face? Harvey’s CV Dazzle camouflage make-up claims to provide “more control over your privacy” by “protecting your data” (Harvey, 2013). Selvaggio asserts his URME masks “create a safe space,” and function as decoy by having his face captured instead of your own (URME Surveillance, 2012). His masks “are best activated by a group of people in public space, like activists or protestors,” Selvaggio (2014) claims. They are a “statement on the right to assert yourself in public space” (URME Surveillance, 2012). Crispin, too, likes to cater to the supposed needs of protestors. His Data-Masks are “intended for use in acts of protest and civil disobedience,” and are themselves “an act of political protest” by means of “giving form to an otherwise invisible network of control” (Crispin, 2014). Blas sees his masks as a tool in the tradition of collective protest movements like Anonymous, the Zapatistas and Pussy Riot. “Facelessness and becoming imperceptible are serious threats to the state and to capitalism,” Blas (2013) claims in a video communiqué.

These cryptographic mask designs are an attempt to reassert the obfuscated lines between virtual and material, human and machine, private and public life. The revolutionary potential of self-assertion and protest is sought offline, on real life streets, in temporal zones of invisible non-identity provided by facial concealment strategies. Blas’ Facial Weaponization Series turn the logic of identification technologies around by making our faces undetectable blobs producing what he calls “non-existence” (Blas, 2013). CV Dazzle defies detection by solarization, creating a negative form, an “anti-face,” as Harvey (2013) calls it. URME Prosthetics work by turning an individual face into a collective face. Meanwhile, Crispin’s Data-Masks reverse engineer and “hold a mirror up to the all-seeing eye of the digital-panopticon” (Crispin, 2013). To an important degree these works are reversals, mirror opposites, that make an argument about how identification technologies “work,” and take a stand against such workings. These masks express their understanding of recognition technology and their critique of it by way of negation, by forming its logical opposite. These masks are non-human, amorphous, unrecognizable, unidentifiable and undetectable to recognition technology—invisible to the algorithmic routines of recognition software, yet hyper-visible in public space, to human eyes.

Reproducing Dualism: the Janus Face of Masking Tactics
Unpacking the underlying assumptions of concealment strategies to counteract recognition technology, it seems that these critics’ concern is focused on the supposed effects of recognition technology on the “self”, on how it allegedly inhibits political freedom, erodes privacy, robs us of our autonomy, and disables dissent. The networked systems of identity recognition technology are imagined here as an important element of social structures, one that both enables and disables human action and political freedom. This too amounts to a form of technological determinism: their masks are there to fix what has been broken, to regain what allegedly got lost in the appropriation and colonization of the borderless and control-free cyberworld by the State-Corporation. A multi-layered and multi-dimensional field is cast into a binary between Good and Bad. For Harvey recognition technology works in the service of the powerful, it is made to serve specific ends. Recognition technology increases its power by regimenting people through “following” them. For Crispin, the use and dissemination of capture technology is objectifying, it turns people into mere objects shaped by a technological rationality on the path towards the disenchantment of the world. For Blas, capture technology is a form of government imposing standardized models upon singularities, it is shaped by its scientific rationality, one that is, according to Blas, built upon 19th-century scientific convictions and endeavours. Whether it is capitalism, asymmetric power relations or technological rationality, these critics are concerned about a possibly ensuing crisis of the status of the human.

This line of criticism is in itself reductive, reproducing the binary oppositions at play in surveillance technology. Reductionism begins with dualism: human/non-human, visible/invisible, power/powerless, quantitative/qualitative, existence/non-existence, individual/collective and cyber/real. Such binary oppositions tend to result in static oppositions, polarizations and antagonisms; hence the references by these pugnacious critics to WWI dazzle strategies, weaponization, revolt, and technological Frankensteins. A dualist approach, too, leads to what Richard Bernstein (1983, p.18) has identified as a “Cartesian anxiety,” the “grand Either/Or”: either you are visible and powerless, or invisible and powerful. Either you are a quantified and steered piece of data or an autonomous, revolting human being. Furthermore, these mask projects are an illustrative example of the now dominant reactionary counter-surveillance strategies proliferating in today’s tech- and art scene. An underdog position is assumed, and the tactic of resistance to the top dog is oppositional.

Such binary logic is problematic, because it reifies a logical law; it treats an abstraction as if it is a concrete thing. Abstract conceptions reduce a multiplicity to a singular, monochromatic object, resulting in what Alfred Whitehead (1953, p.64) has called in *Science and the Modern World* the “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness”: an abstract concept is here regarded as an existing reality. Consequently, it implicitly assumes that identity recognition technology can be grasped through the interplay between opposites and contested by reversing these opposites.

It is here, too, where we can see how the self is understood in relation to recognition technology. Crispin, Harvey and Selvaggio present recognition technology as an Other threatening an idealized Self. The Self is here envisioned to be autonomous, sovereign, self-assertive, revolting—these are grandiose assumptions that are presented as givens; they are neither explained nor defined. As N. Katherine Hayles (1999, p. 290) argued, as long as the human subject is envisioned as an autonomous self with clear boundaries completely independent of its environment, the human-machine relation can only be understood as one of clear-cut division and opposition. What is considered to be an autonomous self can be maintained only as long as it is “free from any transgression of the demarcated boundary between the two”—any compromise is likely to be
perceived as a threat to the self (Hayles, 1999, p. 291), as weakening the sovereignty of the self. “This view of the self authorizes the fear that if the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self’s complete dissolution” (Hayles, 1999, p. 291).

In the name of humanity, alterity, and privacy these critics attempt to safeguard this abstracted and idealized notion of the self against a system that supposedly threatens its independence and humanity. It suggests that for the self to remain autonomous and independent, to safeguard it from quantifying and dehumanizing forces, it needs to thwart recognition technology. Within such an understanding, recognition technology comes to be associated with a threat, and the assumption undergirding their concerns is a loss of the allegedly autonomous self.

This fear of loss of self at play in the concealment from recognition technology echoes both a modernist obsession with uniqueness and originals, as well as what Hans Harbers describes as the endemic Romantic narrative of despair. “It is the story of being overrun by a technological juggernaut, which is guided only by instrumental values…” (2005, p. 12). The quest to protect the self from the encroachment of datafication, quantification and dehumanization reduces resistance to a polarized opposition. Such an understanding assumes the primacy of the human over the machine, the superiority of the self over the other-as-machine—which is equally problematic as the converse. As a result, both sides become monumentalized.

Blas does express concern over how recognition technology forces normative categories upon minority groups. He explains that his masks represent a desire to cultivate “ways of living otherwise” (Blas as cited in Burks, 2015). “Alterity,” he argues, “exists within the cracks and fissures of quantification” (Blas as cited in Burks, 2015). One could argue that his Facial Weaponization series vie for heterogeneity, opacity and non-normative subjectivity, that they attempt to open up a space where one is not consumed by these technologies and experiment with ways of opting out and escaping from the logic of the visible. And they do. But they do so in opposition to a homogenous conception of recognition technology as a monumentalized “apparatus”—yet another dualism. Blas’ series of masks are purportedly about what lies outside of the protocolized, normative templates of identity and activity, about the reductionism of quantification, and a desire to “let exist as such that which is immeasurable, unidentifiable” (Blas, 2014). He calls for alterity and opacity, but he does so in opposition to “the” surveillance state, taken as a gigantic unifier. His “autonomous visibilities”, as he calls them, are posited in firm opposition to a technological “Enemy-Other.” So, though Blas clamours for the immeasurability and alterity of people, and emphasizes a minority politics, he represents recognition technology as a homogenous monolith, and sets up the human-versus-machine relation as one of opposition.

One could object, of course, that these projects make present what otherwise remains invisible. Crispin’s Data-Masks could be understood to “actualize” the virtual, showing the rudimentary oval shapes that pass for a human face online. Nevertheless, these Data-Masks rely on a dichotomy between human/machine, virtual/real identities, and on a positivist optical logic. These classic dualist categories with which we navigate the world are not neutral; they are historical implements of hierarchy and oppression.

Furthermore, black boxing as a response plays into the “informatic visibility” paradigms of the so-called societies of control. It enacts the public face of surveillance. Black boxing is too limited an approach as it reifies the logic of the problem it aims to tackle, while glossing over the ontological assumptions inside the black box, fortifying a stronghold for identity and self, instead of opening a wider playing field that welcomes relational multiplicities, counteracting the Janus-faced logic of binary opposites.
These mask projects imply profound questions, requiring us to consider whether it is in fact the very notion of the self that needs to “stop showing up” and be “de-activated.” Perhaps it is the anthropocentric conception of the indivisible, original, copyrighted, sovereign, white, secular, Western, autonomous and individual Man of singular yet universal value that should be discarded. Is it possible to entertain a refusal both of identity recognition technology and a stable sense of self? It could certainly be argued that Blas and Selvaggio are anxious about the consequences, the possible normative effects of the trust in recognition technology on the “alterity” of people. And yet, their cryptographic anti-recognition masks participate in its underlying logic. Their work is, effectively, reproducing the very logic it aims to evade and break out of.

Contestation in terms of reversal of opposites misses precisely what is specific to these technologies and remains tied to a Romantic idealization of the self as demarcated from and unmediated by its sociotechnical surroundings. We need to de-code contestation in order to multiply “the lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 3). We need different forms of contestation. As Karen Barad (2007) argues in Meeting the Universe Halfway, we are not situated in the world, but part of the world, inseparable from it. As various scholars have noted, sociotechnical objects establish relations between disparate actors, settings, and things—both human and non-human, material and immaterial, and all the layers between. As Paul Dourish (2014) explains, “Information systems are material objects, but so too is information as it is manifest within them. Its specific materialities shape the forms of processing that it allows. Any account of what information is, or what it does within social, cultural, or institutional settings must, then, be grounded in an examination of these material considerations.”

What is specific about recognition technology are its multi-layered and cartographic aspects, from air strainers, fiber optic cables, relay switches, coltan miners, urban planners, airport security systems, data-farms, bio-chip transponders, clunky CCTV boxes, zombie networks, water, “the war on terror”, hard disk failures, privacy law, electricity plugs, overheated processors, 404s, satellites high up in the sky all the way to the submarine cables at the bottom of the ocean floor. Furthermore, the software programs on which recognition technology run cluster, draw connections, draw apart, label, categorize and classify, and this must also be considered as human labour. Black boxing by way of masking obscures an entire socio-technical infrastructural ecology of people and interfaces that program, calculate, read, create, interpret, valuate, process, vet, sift through, pass on and manipulate data. Interpretation is at the core of this ecology as is the human bias and errors that are inherently part of these processes (Gray, Gerlitz Bounegru 2016; Arnall, 2013).

And yet, these are computational processes too. The speed at which these software programs make mathematical computations is so high and the amount of numerical data with which it works is so large that it exceeds the phenomenological bounds of human comprehension. However, recognition technology is not a technological problem waiting for a best-practices technical solution, but a “complex stack.” “A technology that might seem an indissoluble whole breaks into countless actors, pieces and alignments” (Venturini, 2010, p. 261).

In The Limits of Critique Rita Felski (2015) argues that we should re-describe the relation between the object of critique and its context. The object must be understood as a mediator. We should trace the interconnections and conflicts among mediators, she argues. Tracing the lines of
connection, without the primacy of one over the other, cuts through abstract and dualist conceptions, cuts off the dead-end road of body-versus-machines and the human and the non-human, and works toward more complex sociotechnical relations and understandings. By multiplying the relations and layers of the spaces we inhabit, you multiply the avenues for change. It would be hyperbolic to think this amounts to relativism—we should not fall victim to the “Grand Either/Or” (Bernstein, 1983, p.18). A relational approach, Bernstein (1983) has shown in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* does not preclude acting on strong convictions, but it demands an open view. Looking at recognition technology through a relational “lens” makes it more complex, multiform, ambiguous, but also gives us a lot more to work with. We are in need of movements that resist the temptations of a binary universe in favour of emancipating, productive, affective and relational forms of critique. We need critics that resist branches of neo-positivism, aestheticism, and individualism. Over and against a binary thinking of neat demarcations and isolated domains, thinking in terms of relations opens pathways to intersectional forms of critique. A relational approach opens recognition technology up to explore the different social imaginaries with which it has come to be associated and might help us to ask questions often side-lined by a predominant focus on the Self and its “privacy.” Why is it that we think life can be calculated? What bolsters the persistent trust in the objectivity of numbers and neutrality of mathematics? What aspects load recognition technology with God-like qualities—Knowing All and Seeing All? Can we liberate ourselves from the notion of the self as a demarcated, autonomous unit and instead increase our capacity to relate to other people and things? How can we learn to embrace the enigmatic, the flawed, the partial, the impure, the unpredictable within life? Turning once again to Karen Barad (2007, p. 91), convictions are about making worlds, “it is about making specific worldly configurations—not in the sense of making them up *ex nihilo*, or out of language, beliefs or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form” (2007, p. 91). This raises the question of how to give form to an envisioning of the self as a multiform process of relation, as the sum of these ever-changing relations, and of how to embrace the exigencies of the sociotechnical.

My point is not to dismiss these masked interventions, nor to downplay the role recognition technology plays in our prediction- and control-obsessed culture. These masks may neither engender invisible power, nor safeguard “privacy” and “autonomy.” Nonetheless, they are exhibited, people engage with these masks at exhibitions, they are valued and written about. What is more, what they ultimately reflect in their hyper-visible invisibility—invisible to recognition technology, but hyper visual on the street—is their necessary and inevitable failure. Their masqueraded battle for invisibility points to all of that which spills over and falls through data-hungry collection and recognition technologies. All of that which cannot be reduced to data points. As it cuts through categories and disciplines, recognition technology as a social, geopolitical, epistemological, economic, legal, technological, scientific and cultural “cartography” is not “fixable” by masks. And yet, we can trace its contingencies, point out its Achilles’ heel, and imagine different ways of relating to one another. This is a strategy of affirmative presence, as a process of imagining otherwise, of making worlds, constantly opening the doors to unknown futures outside of algorithmic tracking wars and calculated settings.

By taking a relational turn we can come to understand recognition technology not as an object for our eyes but as a relationship between people, settings and non-human objects and things. Once you start tracing these alignments, every supposed self and every piece of technology betrays its myth of unity, linearity, and forks into countless interconnections. The relationship
between human and machine is an infinite map of connections, a manifold of ambiguous, contradictory and competitive connections that can be traced from the micro to the macro level. The black boxing of the self merely caps these connections. A relational understanding of recognition technology will help to engage with a range of avenues, things, people and practices in which the relation between humans and machines can be reshaped, re-imagined and renegotiated.

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