

## Saluting John Frow

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This issue of *Cultural Studies Review* is the final one I will co-edit with John Frow. It has been a pleasure to co-edit with John and it seemed fitting to offer a small intellectual salute to both his work and the engagement and reactions he inspires through the following article and responses. While this was understood as a small commemoration of John's work as editor it also mimics in a more public way the endless (and often very productive) work of commenting upon, responding to and working with the work of our fellow thinkers that all in the larger *Cultural Studies Review* community do.

What follows is a response to one small part of John's writings but he is also an extraordinarily deft reader and that skill can be seen again and again in the pages of this journal. The capacity to read an article in its own terms, to place it properly with reviewers who will best engage with and improve a piece, requires a style of reading that is as much communitarian as critical. The result of that reading then flows on to a published article that is itself better able to be read and so the flow of concatenating readerships spreads.

I would like to thank John for all our co-readings and for the time and attention he has given to the journal in all its guises from bank balances to illustrations. Chris, Ann and I look forward to his continuing participation as contributor and reviewer and wish him well with all his upcoming projects.

## Avatar, Identification, Pornography

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The work done by fictional character, in both narrative and non-narrative texts, is a function of its ability to engage its interlocutor: to do emotional as well as representational work. Always in some sense shaped like a person, a figural pattern asks us to respond to a form of life that we recognise: what happens next, what will its fate be? Because its work is that of engaging the reader's interest, it is 'as much a reconstruction by the reader as it is a textual construct'.<sup>1</sup> You can put this negatively: without the awakening of an interest in a figure that in some way resembles us, we won't engage as fully or deeply with the process of the text. It's arguable that even discursive prose—a conceptual argument dealing with abstract forces, say—can't be dissociated from our sense of a speaking self onto whom we project characteristics, and perhaps even from our tendency to conceive of abstract forces as actors working at human scale and involved in the fundamental narrative patterns of quest and antagonism. To say this is not to privilege the forms of empathetic identification that have been at the heart of the classic European novel or of Hollywood cinema, and the ethical accounts of character that have accompanied them; it is to set out one of the conditions for the existence of fictional character.

Those conditions are minimal because we have the capacity to turn just about anything into a quasi-person. Usually a character has a name; it speaks; it is embodied, unitary, and persistent over time; and it performs an action or a series of actions, on the basis of which we impute intentionality to it. But even these minimal conditions need not all be met. The transmigratory soul in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* has no name and no fixed body; Bertha Mason, the madwoman in *Jane Eyre's* attic, never speaks; an anonymous, featureless Beckett character neck-deep in mud or garbage performs no action other than talking, and Godot is absent in all but name. Neither the gods of the Homeric epics nor the figures of animated cartoons act in accordance with the laws of embodied physical being. What counts is less what they are than what we do with them: the historically, culturally and generically various ways in which the reader or spectator or listener endows them with a specular personhood, and on that basis finds them of interest.

Philippe Hamon divides the study of character into three strands, each of which is the site of particular effects: the study of figuration, where fictional reality-effects are generated; of anthropomorphisation, where the particular kinds of reality-effect that relate to the human figure—a 'moral effect', a 'person-effect', a 'psychological effect'—come into play; and of intersecting projections (*'un carrefour projectionnel'*) on the part of the author and of the reader and critic, who like or dislike and recognise themselves or not in a particular character.<sup>2</sup> Each of these strands is a moment of a process of recognition that brings characters into being. More precisely, recognition is at once an effect generated by fictional character, and a process by which we activate that effect. It is only through such a process of recognition that characters become interesting to us, in the double sense that we find a frame for understanding what kind of being they are, and that in some way we see ourselves in these figures and make an affective investment in them.

That affective investment is often called 'identification': a term that has traditionally been central to theories of character because of its ability to mediate between character as a formal textual structure and the reader's structured investment in it, but a term that is in many ways problematic, particularly because, in assuming a general structure of relations between fictional characters and readers or spectators, it underestimates the complexity and specificity of modes of response.<sup>3</sup> Identification has two relevant and closely linked senses: identification *of*

a character, and identification *with* a character. Identification 'of' is generated by triggers such as a name or a personal pronoun, and it has to do with the separation of a character from all others in the storyworld and with the sense that the character is self-identical over time (this is the form of continuity of the self that Paul Ricoeur calls *idem*, a mode of invariance of the person).<sup>4</sup> Identification 'with' has to do with the filling of that initial moment of identification with an affective content. But these are not two separate moments: the act of recognition that identifies a figure in a text is at the same time a way of relating to that figure. And this act of recognition and response is dual: it goes at once to the position of an enunciating subject and to that of an enunciated object who is at the same time a subject (of action, of thought, of talk) in his or her own right.

Here I want merely to make the argument that identification—but perhaps the more neutral 'positioning' would be a better way of describing this process—takes place initially in relation to an enunciative instance, whether overt or covert, as a precondition of its taking place in relation to a definite character. At its most simple, this positioning is dual: we occupy the place of an enunciating subject (however weakly specified as a quasi-person), and the place of a character who is spoken of. That schema can then be complicated in numerous ways: there may be multiple levels of narration, narrators may be foregrounded or entirely inconspicuous, and in homodiegetic narration (where the narrator is part of the narrated world) the narrator may be identical to the central character, or may play a subordinate role in the storyworld.<sup>5</sup> There may be no one 'central' character, or there may be multiple central characters, simultaneously or successively; and the relation between 'central' and 'minor' characters distributes the reader's affective involvement in complex ways.

Identification takes place in relation to positions of enunciation before it takes place in relation to characters; it may be either positive or negative, 'with' or 'against' (and usually the one implies the other); and identifications may shift during the course of a reading: the investment of affective energy in watching a film or reading a written text is typically diffuse rather than monolithic. Fictional character is textually constructed in the play between positions of enunciation and figural constructs in the storyworld, and these positions are cumulatively and complexly filled during the course of a prose narrative or a lyric or a film or gameplay.

The binding-in of the reading or viewing or speaking subject occurs above all in its slotting into these positions which constitute it as a subject in the very process of making sense. And conversely 'sense' is 'made' within a textual circuit articulating positions through processes of identification, 'the maintenance of these positions being the work effected by us as subjects each time we understand the meaning of a sentence, each time we "get" the joke, each time we "make" the film make sense'.<sup>6</sup> I explore that affective work through a discussion of the role of avatars in digital gaming and of the inscription of the reader or viewer into pornography.

—II

In the worlds of digital gaming and screen-based virtual reality, the inscription of participants into discursive places happens through the manipulation of a representation called an avatar.<sup>7</sup> The avatar, a word which in Vedic religion and its offshoots designates the incarnation of a deity (from the Sanskrit *avatāra*, a descent, a passing over or down), is the primary interface between the user and the screenworld,<sup>8</sup> and it may manifest any degree of incarnation along a spectrum running from the very abstract to the very concrete: from an onscreen cursor, a string of text, a name, a schematic cartoon figure, to a hyperreal three-dimensional cartoon figure, a photograph, or a simulation of the body of the user itself, inscribed into the screenworld by means of voice- and face-recognition technologies and by motion sensors which set up kinaesthetic and proprioceptive feedback loops between the user and the screen.<sup>9</sup>

The avatar is a placeholder, an 'interactive, social representation of a user',<sup>10</sup> deployed in the majority of digital games to make possible 'the players' projections of intent and will into, as well as interaction and manipulation of, the game world'.<sup>11</sup> The simplest view of an avatar, then, is that it is a surrogate for the user, mediating between positions in the actual and the virtual worlds and often projecting an idealised alter ego.<sup>12</sup> Yet the avatar does not simply translate an intention from one world to the other. It is selected or designed in such a way that its abilities match the affordances of the game or universe. James Gee's example is that of the game *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, where the skills called for are those of sneaking and hiding, and the skills of overt confrontation would be out of place.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Marsha Kinder has found that boys would frequently choose the Princess Toadstool avatar in *Super*

*Mario Bros 2*, despite her gender and because of her powers of action (the Princess can float above the ground).<sup>14</sup> The mode of being of the avatar is bound up with the ends it serves, and these ends are both specific to each game or universe, and inherently social.

If the avatar is 'a prosthetic that replaces the entire body',<sup>15</sup> then—a set of capacities, a 'kinaesthetic grammar, with a limited set of actions for us to deploy'<sup>16</sup>—it is also 'a tool for regulating intimacy'.<sup>17</sup> Its most basic function in games which involve more than a single player is to make the player vicariously visible to the avatars of other players; it represents a user to other users within the screenworld, and thereby establishes a realm of mediated social interaction which is also, strictly speaking, a realm of social interaction in its own right.

This distinction between instrumental and social functions of the avatar (functions which are of course never mutually exclusive) corresponds in part to that between first- and third-person perspectives. Lev Manovich argues that in computer space 'the standard interface ... is the virtual camera modeled after the film camera rather than a simulation of unaided human sight'.<sup>18</sup> But this camera looks with subjective eyes: unlike film, where subjective perspective is a marginal technique used primarily 'to effect a sense of alienation, detachment, fear, or violence', in digital games it is the usual manner of achieving 'an intuitive sense of motion and action in game-play'.<sup>19</sup> In strongly rule-based systems this perspective, which is the characteristic one for genres such as the first-person shooter, may be a pure look or camera angle without objectification, or there may be minimal objectification (the cross-hairs of a gun-sight, a protruding rifle barrel at the edge of the frame, a steering wheel). Similarly, real-time strategy games such as *StarCraft* and simulation games with a godlike perspective, such as *The Sims*, may operate from an invisible place which is nevertheless a point of presence and the source of actions. In role-based systems, by contrast, the user's presence in the game or world tends to be represented either as an over-the-shoulder rear view of the avatar, or, more usually, as a fully visible figure.

Among those visible figures we can distinguish a continuum of modalities of avatar construction, from strongly defined and represented characters whose affective force lies in their hyperreal singularity, to minimally defined 'shell' characters whose identificatory force resides in a blankness of surface on which

very diverse players may inscribe their own interests, fantasies and even their empirical features. As a general rule, action games tend to work with invisible or shell characters, while multiplayer games and virtual worlds tend to be driven by increasingly sophisticated technologies of graphic simulation to develop characters with both visual and psychological complexity.<sup>20</sup> In massively multiplayer games such as *Ultima Online* or *World of Warcraft* avatars can take on additional skills and knowledge, as well as change their appearance, in the course of the game. This kind of gaming experience is thus strongly grounded in the identification of players with avatars functioning as ‘affective sympathetic interfaces’ between the actual and virtual worlds.<sup>21</sup>

That identification may have real emotional intensity. Julian Dibbell’s account of the emotional trauma caused by the virtual rape of one avatar by another in the multiplayer dungeon LambdaMOO<sup>22</sup> is the classic study of the proposition that ‘interaction in virtual worlds is real interaction with real emotions and real consequences’: that virtual worlds are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.<sup>23</sup> Real lust and arousal are at play in sexual relations between avatars (just as they are in the represented sex of pornography), and real ethical issues are raised by such actions as virtual sex with child avatars.<sup>24</sup> This is to say that, as with all fictions, the question of the ontological status of fictive entities is largely irrelevant to our ability and willingness to interact with them *as though* they were persons like ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that that willingness is at the heart of the increasingly central role played by avatars in the commercial growth of the gaming industry. The impact of digital gaming upon globalised culture has depended, perhaps unexpectedly, upon a concerted attention in gaming R&D to the design of game characters which must be able to sustain the identifications of very large numbers of persons if the game is to be commercially successful. Avatars are, moreover, the primary way by which gameworlds are embedded in a broader globalised commercial culture, enabling characters to cross genres and media: avatars function not only as essential in-game doppelgangers, but as part of the game’s branding strategies and its associated media spin offs.<sup>26</sup> The Mario Brothers characters, which now drive movies, television shows and other kinds of merchandising, are the exemplars of this new design paradigm. At another level of gaming, *Angry Birds*, at the time of writing the most popular mobile phone application in the world, is integrated with the

production of soft toys, short movies, and so on, all available for purchase online. The marketing of games and of systems such as Xbox Live is thus heavily focused on avatar characterisation; it is above all the avatar that enables digital games to develop and to exert a cultural dominance over an unprecedentedly complex system of interlinked online (and offline) media.

The intensity of affective investment that flows between the user and the avatar should not, however, mask the real discontinuity between the player-subject and their online representative. One of the ways in which we can envisage the complexity of that relation of representation lies in the possibility that multiple selves might control a single avatar, or that a single self might have multiple avatars. The latter can happen in one of two ways: I can be represented by a homogeneous cohort of avatars, as in a game of chess; or I can use alternative avatars, or 'alts', either so that one of them can perform routine tasks while a primary avatar engages in more interesting interactions, or so that I can occupy and explore heterogeneous forms of surrogate selfhood. Tom Boellstorff argues that, if we accept that avatars in *Second Life* are 'not just placeholders for selfhood, but sites of self-making in their own right',<sup>27</sup> then the avatar has a degree of autonomy of the user, and indeed users may act in accord with their avatar's personality rather than the one they would think of as their 'own'. 'As a subject of technics', writes Emily Apter, 'the avatar is not the idealized double of the player-subject (which is the naïve concept of avatar), but a transformer of fates, at once independent and mimetic of some modicum of subjective agency.'<sup>28</sup> The alt is an important index of this partial independence of the avatar from its user, and, as Boellstorff argues, of the way in which the gap between the actual and the virtual is operationalised so as to make it a resource for a sort of 'fractal subjectivity'.<sup>29</sup>

At the heart of the avatar's functions is that of building a sense of presence in a virtual world through the simulation of an embodied sociality. What does 'embodiment' mean in a virtual environment? In one sense the virtual avatar is the opposite of an incarnation: it is a movement from fleshly to digital being. Yet to put it this way is, as T.L. Taylor writes, to rely on 'an impoverished view of the nature of the body, both off- and online'.<sup>30</sup> Rather, we operate constantly with 'distributed bodies and selves'.<sup>31</sup> Taylor cites a distinction made by Frank Biocca between 'the virtual body, the physical body, and the phenomenal body', where the latter



designates 'our body schema or the "mental or internal representation" of our body'.<sup>32</sup> In Biocca's argument:

It appears that embodiment can significantly alter body schema. Metaphorically, we might say that the virtual body competes with the physical body to influence the form of the phenomenal body. The result is a tug of war where the body schema may oscillate in the mind of the user of the interface.<sup>33</sup>

We can thus not assume 'that actual-world embodiment is the only real embodiment': our sense of our body is influenced by each of the forms that it takes.<sup>34</sup> The clearest demonstration that the phenomenal body carries over into the avatar is perhaps the way cultural norms of body space are partly but not completely consistent between actual and virtual worlds. The focal point for perception and action in a virtual world is centered on your avatar. What you see in *Second Life*, for example, is 'the view from your avatar's proximity ... The virtual thirty-meter radius within which you "hear" the typed chat of other residents extends out from your avatar's body.'<sup>35</sup> The sense of being physically immersed in an environment includes a coherent sense of personal space: 'Just as we move away if someone comes too close to us, so players will move their avatars away if someone else's avatar invades their "personal" space, or move them close to signal aggression.'<sup>36</sup> Avatars thus organise space, time and social interaction within the screenworld in ways that are analogous with the organisation of actual space, time and social interaction by and around our physical bodies.

What avatars generate, then, is a sense of a world that is coherent, centered and present to itself and to the user. But virtual presence is no more self-identical than is our presence to ourselves in a primary reality. This nonselfidentity is, I think, neatly demonstrated by a class of entities, signs and states that shadow their positive counterparts. One is the concept of 'afk' or 'away from keyboard', a state in which a user is absent but their avatar remains present; this state, Boellstorff argues, introduces a constitutive absence, or 'a kind of ghostly absent presence', into a virtual world: 'residents never completely "come back" to a virtual world because they were never completely there in the first place'.<sup>37</sup> A second member of this class is the so-called 'ghost signs' that Peter Bogh Anderson describes, in his taxonomy of the computer signs deployed in games, as being without features and unable to be

handled but nevertheless existing as a kind of trace because of their influence on the behavior of other, functional signs.<sup>38</sup> A third is the machine-run entities called bots, logged on as players and used to perform routine functions or to annoy other players in multiplayer environments. And the fourth is the diegetic and nondiegetic machine acts described by Galloway: the steady-state loops that keep a game ticking over in the absence of players, or the issuing of commands such as 'game over'.<sup>39</sup> In each of these, it seems to me, we can recognise the figure of the daemonic other which is at once the negation and the condition of existence of character.

Much of the literature on the avatar has been concerned to dispute the applicability of literary conceptions of character to digital games. Although many of these arguments rely on simplistic dichotomies—interpretation versus action, or identification versus instrumentality, or passive versus active uses of texts and games, respectively<sup>40</sup>—there is nevertheless a core of truth to the distinction. Whereas narratives represent an activity of disordering that moves a 'world' from one state of equilibrium to another, games present an injunction to the player to make this movement happen. In this sense, avatars are more than 'displayed representations on the screen; they 'exist as performed entities',<sup>41</sup> and Ryan's conceptualisation of games in dramatic rather than narrative terms is appropriate. In games:

The player pursues the goal specified by the game by performing a series of moves that determine the destiny of the gameworld. This destiny is created dramatically, by being enacted rather than diegetically, by being narrated. But, in contrast to standard drama, the enactment is autotelic, rather than being directed at an observer: performing actions is the point of the game and the main source of the player's pleasure.<sup>42</sup>

The avatar thus has the dual functions of being an element in an action sequence and a representative of the player in the gameworld. This duality of action and person corresponds to the Aristotelian distinction between *mythos and ēthos*, plot and character, together with his explicit subordination of the latter to the former.<sup>43</sup> If the avatar, like the tragic hero, is a function of plot (the game), then, it is also the mechanism by which the player is inscribed both functionally and affectively into the game. The affective work of games differs from that of tragedy, but the central role of virtual death in digital gaming means that there are both points of contact

with the generic norms of tragedy, and a fundamental dissimilarity because of the reversibility of death in virtual worlds.

The pleasure of rule-based games is kinaesthetic in the first place—a pleasure of the body; but beyond that it is immersive. One speaks of being in the grip of a game, of being absorbed in it; players repeat an action over and over, obsessed with getting it right (and repeating the action through the multiple deaths of their avatar: this is, precisely, a repetition compulsion). Puzzle, quest and combat are the core structures of digital games, and two types of action predominate: moving around the virtual world, and shooting.<sup>44</sup> If identification is involved here, it is less with the avatar than with the process of the game. Ted Friedman speaks of this as an identification with the computer itself, an internalisation of the logic of the program in a way that helps explain:

the strange sense of self-dissolution created by computer games, the way games ‘suck you in’. The pleasure of computer games is in entering into a computer-like mental state: responding as automatically as the computer, processing information as effortlessly, replacing sentient cognition with the blank hum of computation.<sup>45</sup>

But rather than positing a single point of identification (the avatar, kinaesthetic immersion, the logic of computation), we should perhaps posit instead a hierarchy of levels of identification, of ‘layered positionings’. At the deepest level would be the process that Manovich describes as the use of spatialised representations to navigate a multimedia database and thereby immerse the user in an imaginary world.<sup>46</sup> Kinaesthetic positioning would be a moment of this level of identification. At the next level, but equally embedded in the logic of computation, is the simultaneous enactment and learning of an algorithm (‘kill all the enemies on the current level, while collecting all the treasures it contains; go to the next level and so on until you reach the last level’) which mimes computer algorithms in a manner ‘too uncanny to be dismissed’.<sup>47</sup> At each of these levels the player identifies with a logic of movement through a world. At higher levels, identification takes place in relation to the objects that populate that world, including an avatar that corresponds to the placement of the user; and, depending on the genre of the game, these higher, figural levels may or may not be present.

Unlike traditional board-, sports-, and card games, which are relatively abstract, digital games tend to project worlds; and worlds precede and suppose the avatars that negotiate them.<sup>48</sup> In spatial terms, these worlds are a 'fully rendered, actionable space', able to be explored exhaustively.<sup>49</sup> Yet they are also, as Manovich argues, structured by a binary ontology that distinguishes animate entities from a space which is thus discontinuous and aggregate rather than systematic and homogeneous.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the temporal structure of gameworlds is split between the time of play and moments of suspended time in which the player arranges the framework of play (sets up actions, rearranges the disposition of characters, inspects statistics, and so on).<sup>51</sup> Game time itself can be described in terms of a 'basic duality' of the time taken to play the game and the time of events in the game world.<sup>52</sup> Action games are usually played in real time, whereas in strategy and simulation games time can be slowed down or speeded up.

The crucial point about the spacetime coordinates of gameworlds is their malleability and their reversibility. Games can be endlessly replayed; the death of an avatar is (almost) always provisional. This death, says Aarseth, lays bare the logical distinction between the character; the internal addressee of the game; and the player or user, and thus the epistemological hierarchy that governs the game: the character dies, is erased from the game, and begins again in another; the addressee or narratee is told of the death and invited to play again; and the user, 'aware of all this in a way denied to the narratee, learns from the mistakes and previous experience and is able to play in a different game'.<sup>53</sup> But the death of the avatar lays bare, too, the fantasmatic nature of identification with the gameworld: driven by a compulsive repetition, 'the purpose of a targeting game is the overcoming of death through the targeting of the other, freeing the self to be itself—temporarily. The goal, the target of the target, is to stop playing while still alive.'<sup>54</sup>

—III

My second study is of a very different matrix of textual practices, built around the representations we label pornographic. There are strong reasons, I think, for insisting on 'the circumstantial character of pornography' as at once 'an eroticising device, a target of medical and pedagogical programmes, a tradable commodity, an aesthetic category, an object of feminist and governmental reforms, [and] a legal

problem'.<sup>55</sup> It is circumstantial because the same representation of intimate body parts will have a quite different force on an adult website and in a medical textbook, and because its definition emerges on quite different social surfaces. Yet pornography is often, perhaps even usually, understood as being unified precisely by the relation it bears to actions and emotions. When Stephen Dedalus expounds his theory of the beautiful to his friend Lynch, he contrasts the action of the beautiful, which 'awakens, or ought to awaken, or induces, or ought to induce, an esthetic stasis, an ideal pity or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth, prolonged, and at last dissolved by what I call the rhythm of beauty', with 'the feelings excited by improper art', which are 'kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts.'<sup>56</sup> That definition, in all its Kantian normativity, concisely summarises the argument against which I wish to argue.

Pornography, I want to say, is an extreme but not atypical form of the affective working of texts. It raises again the question of the level at which the inscription of readers or viewers takes place, since it is structurally marked by the poverty of its characterisation—those 'truck-drivers, airline hostesses, nurses or nuns, all of whom are deemed to be sexually more active than surveyors and accountants'.<sup>57</sup> Susan Sontag speaks of it as 'a theater of types, never of individuals': the only generalisation we can make about characters in prose fiction, she writes, 'is that they are, in Henry James' phrase, "a compositional resource"', and the figures who act as sexual objects in pornography can be compared to one of the principal 'humors' of comedy, the naïf, the 'still center in the midst of outrage':<sup>58</sup> a Candide or a Buster Keaton, seen only from the outside and using a deadpan tone to generate, not the release of laughter but:

the release of a sexual reaction, originally voyeuristic but probably needing to be secured by an underlying direct identification with one of the participants in the sexual act. The emotional flatness of pornography is thus neither a failure of artistry nor an index of principled inhumanity. The arousal of a sexual response in the reader *requires* it. Only in the absence of directly stated emotions can the reader of pornography find room for his own responses.<sup>59</sup>

But is it true that a response to pornography is secured by 'an underlying identification with one of the participants in the sexual act'? An alternative view would be that the inscription of the reader or viewer takes place at the level of enunciation: the level of discursive address, or, in the case of visual media, of the look. Laura Mulvey argues for a distinction between voyeuristic and fetishistic modes of identification with the look, giving rise to distinct forms of narrativisation: a voyeuristic regime will tend to be distanced, analytic and sadistic, and to generate articulated and linear narratives; a fetishistic regime will attempt to abolish narrative distance and is therefore (in John Ellis's words) 'only capable of producing an attenuated narration, a constant repetition of scenarios of desire, where the repetition around certain neuralgic points outweighs any resolution of a narrative enigma, any discovery or reordering of facts'.<sup>60</sup> Hence the episodic structure of pornography, the anxiety of an act of looking which is serially repeated and which, in denying the very fact of its own existence, thereby inscribes the reader as its accomplice.<sup>61</sup>

The scenario happens over and over in *Sade*: when Justine, hidden in the bushes and silently protesting the acts committed by Bressac and his companion, nevertheless seems to witness every sordid detail of their tryst; or when Justine and Rosalie, hidden in a closet, peep out at the surgeon Rodin whipping and abusing a series of children (and when Justine explains that 'all takes place directly before us, not a detail can escape us'),<sup>62</sup> it is we who are positioned with her, complicit in her look and the anonymous, ownerless desire that fills it. With a greater sophistication, that other rewriter of Richardson's eroticised spectacle of virtue in distress, Choderlos de Laclos, endows the reader with a knowledge which is always guilty, as when we read a letter addressed by Valmont to the Présidente which we have just been told was written from the bed of the prostitute Émilie, using her back as a desk: a knowledge that allows us fully to grasp the letter's language of double entendre.<sup>63</sup> The equation the novel sets up is this: to be virtuous is to be innocent; to be innocent is to be ignorant, and therefore gullible, and therefore vulnerable; conversely, to have insight into others (and the very structure of the novel, its consistent clash of perspectives between those who know and those who are deceived, valorises knowledge, insight, clarity of perception of the intricacy of motives and desires) is to

be the opposite of innocent. We occupy every pronoun in the novel, and possess a knowledge that belongs to none and transcends each of them.

In the languages of the social sciences, and of the commissions of inquiry that draw upon them, the question of the inscription of readers or viewers into texts becomes the question of the effects of texts upon their audience. I won't rehearse here the detail of these numerous studies, which have been ably summarised and dissected elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> Their very framing in terms of distinct domains of representation and real-world consequences, with a more or less mechanical translation from the one to the other, renders them problematic. As a totality, the 'effects' research is contradictory and incoherent; the one area where there is some degree of consistent agreement is the study of convicted sex offenders, who 'tend to use less pornography than control groups' and, on average, 'come from sexually repressed backgrounds and are exposed to pornography at a later age'.<sup>65</sup> Beyond that, the scientific literature does little more than reflect the diversity of opinions concerning pornography in the larger society.

The more influential version of the notion of the 'effects' of pornography has doubtless been the radical-feminist coupling of pornography with the rape and degradation of women: pornography the theory, rape the practice.<sup>66</sup> In the writings of the most systematic exponent of this line, Catherine MacKinnon, pornography 'is a form of forced sex', closely akin to rape and prostitution, and as such it is the truth of 'the sexuality of male supremacy, which fuses the erotization of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female. Gender is sexual. Pornography constitutes the meaning of that sexuality.'<sup>67</sup> The circle is seamless. Crucially, pornography is not a more or less conventional construction of the real: 'Pornography is not imagery in some relation to a reality elsewhere constructed. It is not a distortion, reflection, projection, expression, fantasy, representation, or symbol either. It is sexual reality', and the actors in a pornographic movie 'are real women to whom something real is being done'.<sup>68</sup> The harm done by pornography is thus not moral but political, and the 1983 anti-pornography ordinance drafted by MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin for the city of Minneapolis couches this as 'a harm of gender inequality'.<sup>69</sup>

Many later feminists have attacked the literalism that underlies MacKinnon's collapsing of representation into the real, accusing her of adopting 'an especially

narrow version of behaviorist psychology in equating images with actions and imagining a straightforward causal connection between the sight of images and one's subsequent behavior'.<sup>70</sup> But there is more to say about the ontological distinctions at issue here. In his long and perceptive reading of MacKinnon's argument J.M. Coetzee draws out something of what is most radically interesting about it:

To MacKinnon, male sexuality is—and indeed is defined by—the possession and consumption of women as sexual objects. Visual pornography caters to male sexuality by creating for it accessible sexual objects, namely images of women. As objects of male desire, women and images of women are not categorically distinct: 'Sex in life is no less mediated than it is in art. Men have sex with their image of a woman.' Through this thoroughly Freudian insight MacKinnon draws into doubt and even collapses the distinction between the reality and the representation. The woman with whom a man has physical relations is only a vehicle through whom he strives to attain the ensemble of representations that make up her image for him.<sup>71</sup>

The radicalism is in part that of Puritan iconoclasm, but MacKinnon's 'thoroughly Freudian insight' is one that can be turned to other uses in an account of the saturation of the real by the fantasmatic.

Frances Ferguson is similarly persuaded that MacKinnon has something important to say about the performative structure of representations: 'Far from being naïve about representation', she writes, 'or unable to tell the difference between an act and the representation of that act, the strength of MacKinnon's position is precisely its focus on the representation as act.'<sup>72</sup> Ferguson's claim is built on a broader argument that pornography is coeval with and integral to the emergence of utilitarian social structures in the late eighteenth century which, rather than recognising intrinsic merits, distribute value between individuals on the basis of objectively recognised actions: both the school and the prison work as such public distributive structures making use of explicit criteria of performance. So, she argues, does pornography: in the writings of Sade, sex and its representation are a perceptible mechanism for sorting out inequalities of power and for allowing the reader to decide about the costs for an individual of collective actions. Sade 'focuses



on the evaluations that sexual games produce for all of the members of the community so as to insist on the hierarchy of hierarchy—so that one can know who's boss'.<sup>73</sup> But this is surely wrong: while it may be the case that the reader sees the costs of sexual scenarios as too high (think of Roland's slave Suzanne in *Justine*, her buttocks calloused from being whipped with a bull's pizzle, a cancer on her breast and an abscess in her womb as 'the fruit of his lecheries'),<sup>74</sup> this judgement in no way alters the collective structure: hierarchies in Sade are never the outcome of a distributive action, since they always precede sexual action as a rigid and unchanging demarcation between a libertine elite and its degraded victims.<sup>75</sup>

The 'representational collapse'<sup>76</sup> that Ferguson sees as a strength of MacKinnon's argument (the description, for example, of pornography 'not as a description of sex but as sex')<sup>77</sup> is what most closely aligns that argument with the characteristic truth-effects of visual pornography: the money shots that prove the 'reality' of male orgasm. This is an 'empiricism of naïve realism: the real is what we can see',<sup>78</sup> and it ultimately works against any recognition of the fantasmatic structuring of the real. For MacKinnon and Dworkin, pornography is the record of a crime (since male sexuality is by definition an act of violence against women, and since the women who act in pornographic films do so, by definition, as the result of physical or economic coercion and—whether they know it or not—against their own real interests). The collapsing of representations into acts is thus equally a collapsing of the distinction between consensual and non-consensual sex—a distinction which is no less and no more important in the case of acted pornography than in other areas covered by criminal law.

Beverly Brown spells out the case against that representational collapse when she writes that 'the harms feminism wishes to mark do not depend for their seriousness on being or resulting directly in acts'; where pornographic images do have consequences for 'ordinary' behavior, however, 'they will not be of the order of a literal re-enactment, but work through a general psychic economy as it orders and disorders conduct'.<sup>79</sup> Understanding the harms of pornography in this way underlines the importance of holding together in a single frame at once the ontological discontinuity which allows us to distinguish a representational act from other acts, and the ontological continuity that binds them to each other.

Ferguson writes of pornography as an intensification of what she calls, after Niklas Luhmann, the 'body-to-body analogy': an orientation of the reader's social and spatial experience in relation to that of the represented bodies of fictional characters, in such a way that personal memories come to look like 'representations of hypothetical or fictitious experience'.<sup>80</sup> Pornography, that is to say, is an intensification of the technologies of bodily affect that Richardson developed for the European novel and that constitute the properly mimetic dimension of drama. It touches on the taboo, the daemonic, what Sontag calls 'the extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of humanity'.<sup>81</sup> And it raises the paradox of how it is that an image, a narrative, a voice on a telephone—the most schematic outline of a representation of sexual desire—can invoke a corresponding desire in us, inducing in our body a state of physical arousal no matter what our will or our judgment might wish; the 'effects' of pornography are registered on the body. This is the paradox of fictional character: that there are real toads in its imaginary garden; its dream of passion comes true in our waking world.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Hamon, "Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage," in Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Kayser, Wayne Booth and Philippe Hamon, *Poétique du récit*, Seuil, Paris, 1977, p. 119 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Hamon, *Le Personnel du roman: Le système des personnages dans les Rougon-Macquart d'Emile Zola*, Droz, Geneva, 1983, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Julian Murphet describes identification as 'the moral engagement of a fictive "one" by the "one" that I hypothetically am', and argues that that it thereby functions as a disavowal of 'the inherent multiplicity of a complex structure of signification'. 'The Mole and the Multiple: A Chiasmus of Character', *New Literary History*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2011, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 119.

- <sup>5</sup> The concept of homodiegesis is taken from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane Lewin, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1980.
- <sup>6</sup> Claire Pajaczkowska, 'The Heterosexual Presumption: A Contribution to the Debate on Pornography', *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1981, p. 83.
- <sup>7</sup> I am indebted for much of the thinking and some of the formulations in this section to my colleagues Justin Clemens and Tom Apperley.
- <sup>8</sup> I use this term to cover the represented space–time coordinates of both digital games and virtual universes such as *Second Life*.
- <sup>9</sup> Katherine Hayles writes about this process in relation to virtual reality technologies, many of which have now been incorporated into game design, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, pp. 26–7 and passim.
- <sup>10</sup> Mark Stephen Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life*, New Riders, Berkeley, 2008, p. 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Anders Tychsen, Michael Hitchens and Thea Brolund, 'Character Play—The Use of Game Characters in Multi-Player Role-Playing Games Across Platforms', *ACM Computers in Entertainment*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2008, article 22, p. 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Robbie Cooper's *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators*, Chris Boot, London, 2007, revealingly juxtaposes images of users and their online selves.
- <sup>13</sup> James Paul Gee, 'Video Games and Embodiment', *Games and Culture*, vol. 3, nos 3–4, 2008, p. 258.
- <sup>14</sup> Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 107.
- <sup>15</sup> Meadows, p. 92.
- <sup>16</sup> Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott, 'Heavy Hero or Digital Dummy? Multimodal Player-Avatar Relations in *Final Fantasy 7*', *Visual Communication*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, p. 221.
- <sup>17</sup> Meadows, p. 36.
- <sup>18</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001, p. 265.
- <sup>19</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 40.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Celia Pearce, 'Towards a Game Theory of Game' in *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, pp. 146, 152.
- <sup>21</sup> Ana Paiva, Gerd Andersson, Kristina Höök, Dário Mourão, Marco Costa and Carlos Martinho, 'SenToy in FantasyA: Designing an Affective Sympathetic Interface to a Computer Game', *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, vol. 6, 2002, pp. 378–89.
- <sup>22</sup> Julian Dibbell, 'A Rape in Cyberspace', *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World*, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1998, pp. 11–30; first published in a slightly different form in *Village Voice*, 23 December 1993.

- <sup>23</sup> Mikael Jakobsson, 'Rest in Peace, Bill the Bot: Death and Life in Virtual Worlds', in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, ed. Ralph Schroeder, Springer-Verlag, London, 2002, p. 71.
- <sup>24</sup> Meadows, p. 57; Andrew A. Adams, 'Virtual Sex With Child Avatars', in *Emerging Ethical Issues of Life in Virtual Worlds*, ed. Charles Wankel and Shaun Malleck, Information Age Publishing, North Carolina, 2010, pp. 55–72.
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 116–17.
- <sup>26</sup> Cf. Tom Apperley, *Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay From the Situated to the Global*, Theory on Demand no. 6, Institute of Networked Cultures, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 12.
- <sup>27</sup> Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p. 149.
- <sup>28</sup> Emily Apter, 'Technics of the Subject: The Avatar-Drive', *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2008, n.p.
- <sup>29</sup> Boellstorff, p. 150.
- <sup>30</sup> T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, p. 117.
- <sup>31</sup> T.L. Taylor, 'Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds', in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, ed. Ralph Schroeder, Springer-Verlag, London, 2002, p. 58.
- <sup>32</sup> Frank Biocca, 'The Cyborg's Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1997, n.p.; cited in Taylor, 'Living Digitally', p. 57.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Boellstorff, p. 135.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 129; I have taken the liberty of changing Boellstorff's ethnographic preterite into the present tense.
- <sup>36</sup> Jessica Wolfendale, 'My Avatar, My Self: Virtual Harm and Attachment', *Ethics and Information Technology*, no. 9, 2007, p. 114.
- <sup>37</sup> Boellstorff, p. 117.
- <sup>38</sup> Peter Bogh Anderson, *A Theory of Computer Semiotics: Semiotic Approaches to Construction and Assessment of Computer Systems*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 211; cited in Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997, pp. 32–3.
- <sup>39</sup> Galloway, pp. 8–38. Each of these figures closely resembles the 'quasi-objects' that Michel Serres identifies as occupying the space between subjecthood and objecthood: an object that, without being a subject, 'marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject'. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982, p. 225.

- <sup>40</sup> For example, Ken Perlin, 'Can There Be a Form Between a Game and a Story?', in *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, p. 14; James Newman, 'The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame', *Game Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, n.p., <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>>; Aarseth, *Cybertext*, p. 38.
- <sup>41</sup> Alison Gazzard, 'The Avatar and the Player: Understanding the Relationship Beyond the Screen', *2009 Conference in Games and Virtual Worlds for Serious Applications*, IEEE Computer Society, 2009, p. 190.
- <sup>42</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Will New Media Produce New Narratives?' in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2004, p. 349.
- <sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics [De Poetica]*, trans. Ingram Bywater, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, Random House, New York, 1941), para. 1450a, p. 1460.
- <sup>44</sup> Pearce, p. 156; Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 118.
- <sup>45</sup> Ted Friedman, 'Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space', in *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*, ed. Greg M. Smith, New York University Press, New York, 1999, p. 136.
- <sup>46</sup> Manovich, p. 215.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- <sup>48</sup> Jesper Juul, 'Introduction to Game Time', *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, p. 139.
- <sup>49</sup> Galloway, p. 63.
- <sup>50</sup> Manovich, pp. 253–4, 256.
- <sup>51</sup> Galloway, p. 65.
- <sup>52</sup> Juul, p. 131.
- <sup>53</sup> Espen J. Aarseth, 'Nonlinearity and Literary Theory', in *Hyper/Text/Theory*, ed. George P. Landow, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1994, p. 74.
- <sup>54</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007, p. 138.
- <sup>55</sup> Ian Hunter, David Saunders and Dugald Williamson, *On Pornography: Literature, Sexuality and Obscenity Law*, Macmillan, London, 1993, pp. ix, 229.
- <sup>56</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, London, 1960, pp. 206, 204–5.
- <sup>57</sup> Bernard Arcand, *The Jaguar and the Anteater: Pornography Degree Zero*, trans. Wayne Grady, Verso, London, 1993, pp. 16–17.
- <sup>58</sup> Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', *Styles of Radical Will*, Dell, New York, 1970, pp. 51, 42, 54.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- <sup>60</sup> John Ellis, 'Photography/Pornography/Art/Pornography', *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1980, p. 99; cf. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no 3, 1975, pp. 13–14.
- <sup>61</sup> Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1978, p. 91.

- <sup>62</sup> Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, Grove Press, New York, 1965, p. 537.
- <sup>63</sup> Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, trans. P. W. K. Stone, Penguin, London, 1961, pp. 110-11.
- <sup>64</sup> For a small selection, cf. Edward Donnerstein, Daniel Linz and Steven Penrod, *The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications*, The Free Press, New York, 1987; Arcand, pp. 62-75; Alan McKee, Katherine Albury and Catharine Lumby, *The Porn Report*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 74-97.
- <sup>65</sup> McKee et al., p. 77.
- <sup>66</sup> Robin Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape', in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Laura Lederer, William Morrow Co., 1980, p. 139.
- <sup>67</sup> Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, p. 148.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>70</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Pornography the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, p. 41, summarising the arguments of Sara Diamond, Ann Snitow, Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter and Carole Vance in *Women Against Censorship*, ed. Varda Burstyn, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 1985. The other key feminist response to the work of Dworkin and MacKinnon is *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance [1984], Pandora Press, London, 1992).
- <sup>71</sup> J.M. Coetzee, 'The Harms of Pornography: Catherine MacKinnon', *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, pp. 71-2, citing Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, p. 199.
- <sup>72</sup> Ferguson, p. 44.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>74</sup> Sade, *Justine*, p. 677.
- <sup>75</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, p. 24: '[T]here are two great classes of Sadian society. These classes are set, one cannot emigrate from one to another: no social promotion.'
- <sup>76</sup> Ferguson, p. 46.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- <sup>78</sup> Coetzee, p. 75.
- <sup>79</sup> Beverley Brown, 'A Feminist Interest in Pornography: Some Modest Proposals', *m/f*, no. 5-6, 1981, pp. 13-14.
- <sup>80</sup> Ferguson, p. x, citing Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, trans. Kathleen Cross, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, p. 59.
- <sup>81</sup> Sontag, p. 57.

## Productive Conjunctions

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Avatars and pornography: what is the ground on which Frow brings these together? At one level, of course, it is the character systems and forms of identification that are Frow's primary concern in this essay. Yet this aspect of his argument is subtended by a more far-reaching contention which insists on both the inherent sociality of textual phenomena and the textuality of the social. In a double movement, Frow opens up the texts he engages with from without in showing how their properties are shot through with the social relations which produce and enable them at the same time that they are inscribed as active agents within the make-up of those social relations. This is not surprising. The intermeshing of the social and the textual has been a leitmotif of Frow's work from his early critical engagements with Marxist literary theory and the projects of the new literary history, through his preoccupation with regimes of value and their social articulations, to his more recent preoccupations with genre theory and character systems.<sup>1</sup>

These are not, though, the only productive conjunctions that Frow establishes in bringing fictional character systems and forms of social personhood together. That he does so in ways that range effortlessly across popular and high forms is another aspect of his intellectual signature. The European novel and computer games; Greek mythology and Hollywood cinema; literary and hard-core pornography—these provide the coordinates of a discussion that is concerned with

the sociocultural registers of textual phenomena whose scope is not deterred by the conventional hierarchical forms of their classification. This is not to say that Frow takes no account of these. He does not, either here or in his work more generally, discount the effects of those forms of ordering and classifying textual phenomena that are conventionally referred to as processes of canonisation. The conception that he brings to these through his work on regimes of value is, however, a more nuanced one, allowing for a greater heterogeneity of practices of valuing and their effects. This has been an aspect of his critical engagement with Bourdieu's work at the theoretical level where he has challenged the adequacy of Bourdieu's account of the processes of legitimation and the ways in which these divide cultural fields in favour of more plural articulations of the relations between different regimes of value. It has also characterised his empirical engagements with Bourdieu in terms of both his grasp of the often intricately complex organisation of popular cultural phenomena and his assessments of the degree to which Bourdieu's categories satisfactorily illuminate the forms of sociocultural stratification that prevail in contemporary Australia.<sup>2</sup>

There is, though, a third aspect of Frow's essay that also signals a distinctive property of his work more generally: that of holding together analysis conducted at a high level of abstraction and its application to, as we would say these days, 'matters of concern'.<sup>3</sup> That there are significant issues at stake in his discussion becomes clear when, toward the end of the essay, he insists on 'the importance of holding together in a single frame at once the ontological discontinuity which allows us to distinguish a representational act from other acts, and the ontological continuity that binds them to each other'. Presented in the context of a critical rebuttal of consequences of Andrea Dworkin's and Catherine McKinnon's reductive elision of this distinction, the political pertinence of Frow's ability to hold to seemingly contrary positions by producing not, to be sure, their dialectical synthesis, but a level of conceptualisation that is produced by the tension between them, is made abundantly clear.

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<sup>1</sup> See, respectively, John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986; *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995; and *Genre*, Routledge, London, 2005. I first came to know John through his critical interrogation of the relations between Marxism and literary history, a central preoccupation of my work at the time. The positions we took on a number of related matters—the role of the aesthetic in Marxist thought, our conceptions of the relations between texts and history—were similar on many key points, laying the basis for what, for me at least, has been an enduringly productive set of subsequent collaborations.

<sup>2</sup> On the former, see the quite peerless discussion of the complex constitution of Elvis as a popular cultural phenomenon in John Frow, 'Is Elvis a God? Cult, Culture, Questions of Method', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1998, pp. 199–212, and on the latter the book arising out of the project which sought to critically apply Bourdieu's categories to the relationships between class and culture in contemporary Australia: Tony Bennett, Mike Emmison and John Frow, *Accounting for Tastes*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See, for a compelling example, John Frow, 'A Politics of Stolen Time', *Australian Humanities Review*, February 1998.

## Domain to Network

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Discussing those studies of the effects pornography is supposed to have on people, John Frow says: ‘Their very framing in terms of distinct domains of representation and real-world consequences, with a more or less mechanical translation from the one to the other, renders them problematic.’ Indeed, it seems we may not live in a two-sided universe after all. But how did we get to this pretty pass, this mountainous divide called ‘representation’? We look down one side to the real world, and on the other everything is totally made-up.

If we follow Bruno Latour’s argument, this has come about through the exertions of Science (the capital S meaning science as a kind of ideology, as opposed to actual sciences) taking charge of and creating a domain of Nature, from which it extracts its laws. These laws, derived from Nature itself, are supposed to be factual and immutable, rather than ‘made up’. The very strength of this idea of real-world factuality has the effect of relativising, weakening and turning our cultures into mere fancy. Yet there is a contradiction when pornography is attributed with the power of corrupting real peoples’ lives; then it is not said that this material is ‘mere fancy’, because its effects are real, even if the stories are fictional.

Latour’s concept of network provides a solution to this contradiction by eliminating the older conceptual architecture which has huge blocks called ‘Society’ and ‘Language’ as well as ‘Nature’. They tend to fill up all available space and

obscure the pathways that assemble that heterogeneous array of things that, for instance, makes a pornographic experience possible. The old model, indeed, has a 'mechanical translation' from Real World via Text to Subject. To get rid of the European unified idea of Nature, one has to show how sciences *make up* its laws, as they build facts and values in experimental and controlled conditions, then helping this form of reality persist by maintaining the institutions that sustain it; nature then pluralises because it is sustained differently in different times and places. A similar case can be made for diverse literary domains which assemble texts, schools, values, tonalities and public support, not to mention fictional characters, who have the remarkable quality of being immortal if you sustain them with your literary dedication!

A focus on networks thus tends to bring with it a different conception of sociality. In Latour, a 'politics of networks' is a different thing from a politics of other assemblages like nations and classes. (Nations and classes don't disappear, of course, but they too start to look different as networks). Sociality would be 'composed in a heterogeneous fashion of unexpected elements revealed in the course of inquiry'.<sup>1</sup>

*a composed sociality*

The social assemblage is not given in advance, you find out what it is as you go about participating in it, or studying what it is doing. For the study of 'fiction', the definition of the domain of enquiry (Literary Studies) should not remain unaffected by the agency of actors external to it, isn't this equivalent to the claim of relevance to the present or future? Likewise, the 'fictions' we might like to think of as 'objects of inquiry' show up as a different kind of sociality depending on what kind of *mode* it is in. If it is an interactive game with immersive effects, then the mode depends very much on the technology, the software engineers, the setting (parlour, networked, individual iphone), the extent that the elements are seen *alliances forming in action*, composed of *linkages* and nodes established through *negotiation* among gamers. The clever actors in networks find ways of doing new things. An agent in such a gaming-network might say, 'We'll need a cheat for this one', and this innovation comes as a trial or a test for the game-network as the cheat is linked in and starts to be shared. Networks are assemblages designed in an on-going fashion to *persist*, not just to *exist* as a bounded group of humans acting on the world.

*heterogeneous*

It is composed of concepts, hand-held controllers, pixels, feelings and ideologies as much as people. Each network-world will have its own *style* and 'template' (Latour). This style might even be reflected in how one writes an analytic account of it.

*unexpected elements*

What is revealed about it is *necessarily surprising*; it is not a set of data that was always waiting out here in the world for someone to find. That data is *fabricated* with the help of the instruments of inquiry (try establishing microbiological facts without microscopes, or literary facts without chronologies and documentary procedures of verification, try doing either without institutional support).

This politics of networks, then, is one of refusing the knowing subject vs knowable object opposition. The world is neither 'out there' nor singular. A literary agent like a critic, a narrator or character can have the additional aims to show *how* she got to know via empirical experience, what *instruments* succeeded or failed, what the *costs* of participation were, and are, for different kinds of participants in the network. That might sound like a mild-mannered politics, but for a literary or literary-pornographic experience the survival of a world is at stake (not just a culture or a 'represented' version of the world 'we all share', but an *actual world*). So a conventional experience of literature (including its academic enquiry) can only persist in partnership with a network of universities and schools; the pornographic experience may only survive with its dedicated institutions and techniques. Common sense? But why not spell it out, especially if it helps demolish dinosaurs like Language, Society and (human) Nature, which are routinely evoked as sources of explanation, instead of being the very things in need of explanation.

The world will always be bifurcated along subject-object lines as long as our instruments of inquiry are not foregrounded. The easy leap from tried and true methods to new objects of inquiry is too tempting. So I see our participation in literary networks, past and present, as *experimental*: what surprises will there be for our established domains of knowledge if certain data, testimonies, and so on, are investigated with different instruments and outside of 'their very framing in terms of distinct domains' (Frow)? What are the *transformations* if values, materials, ideas are *followed along pathways* as they change and adapt to the surprising elements

they encounter? Most importantly for me, how can 'we' engage such networks without seeing our own activities as similarly networked? That means a readiness to negotiate, to be clear about what 'we' stand for, to foreground techniques, and not to foreclose too quickly on how many participants (human and non-human) might be involved, and to count the costs of participation for different agents.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence: une anthropologie des modernes*, La Découverte, Paris, 2012, p. 47.