

Non-Centered Centers

Queering Animation

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Animation's positionality at the interstices of the polemical relation between analogue and digital necessarily proffers up the grounds for a radical reconsideration of cinema's ontological status. Under the purview of cinema's identity crisis at the turn of the century, we may find an analogous moment of introspection in third-wave feminism's moment of self-reckoning with intersectionality—more specifically, its deconstruction and reconstitution of gender that repudiates any originary state of putative holism while in turn actively fostering a conception of gender as non-identical to itself. This essay employs Judith Butler's landmark text *Gender Trouble* (1990) and its study of the system of deferrals and lack at the heart of the social conception of gender to formulate an analogous conception of the “pliable ontology” of digital animation that actively eschews a naturalist/realist aesthetic (whether fully or modally applied). This analogy is used to delineate the ways an aesthetics of fluctuation can formally promulgate liberating forms of queer embodiment.

The Modernist insistence on tightly encapsulated systems that fill certain teleological quotas is a particular problematic that has compromised the discursive formulation of cinema. Lev Manovich's essay “What is Digital Cinema?” provides a “brief archaeology of moving pictures” by inscribing cinema's moment of sedimentation as a self-defining technology in the instance whereby it “cut all references to its origins in artifice” and “supers[ed] previous techniques for creating and displaying moving images” nascent in the “Thaumatrope...Zootrope...Viviscope” (Manovich 1999, 176–177). Now systematized within the realm of live-action narrative cinema and hiding its birthmarks, the advent of digital cinema (animation/CGI) becomes that uncanny “return of the repressed” of cinema that for Manovich serves as a *dialectic of fatal teleology*, the ouroboros that announces cinema—now a “particular branch of painting”—as dead (Manovich, 192). Thomas Lamarre provides an exegesis of Manovich's position in his piece *Animation and the Repetition of Cinema* and forwards an image of Manovich propelling a hermeneutics of paranoia whereby digital animation effectively “usurps indexicality”—i.e., new media announces “the end of stable references to reality, the end of stable identity”—as it simultaneously provides cinema with its second death—the first being its systematization at the hand of normative, regulatory institutionalization (Lamarre 2006, 69). The crux of Lamarre's argument, however, is that Manovich's teleology is made possible only upon the grounds of a metaphysics of presence that he instantiates at the origin of cinema, a nascent moment he treats as selfsame and ideational. In fact, Manovich's burrowing into cinema's origin a smooth pre-determinacy along with the presumptive cincture he places on analogue cinema's capacity for indexicality has Lamarre propose that Manovich imbues cinema with an identity that is ontologically prior to expression. Contrarily, Lamarre's move is to focalize his study of new media through a lens of “divergence at the origins of cinema” that for-

mulates a positive plane of immanence for digital cinema *no longer* negatively defined (2006, 175).

Here, Judith Butler may help us parse what is at stake in imagining a queer ontology of digital animation through Lamarre's rhizomatic claim. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler provides a genealogical episteme that "refuses to search for the origins of gender" as such a critique intrinsically repudiates the frenzied reproduction of "the Real" implicit in the search for a pre-discursive origin (Butler 1990, xxxi). As such, Butler problematizes the sex/gender divide as conceived as a causal relation by prescribing to sex the position of a duplicitous cipher that creates itself as an originary reality when *it*, in fact, was "always-already gender" (9). For Butler, there is no "pre-discursive whole" that may provide reprieve, as gender functions as a "complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time...it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" (22).

The convergences between Lamarre's multiramified conceptualization of cinema's "origin" and Butler's diffusive presentation of gender are palpable. First, the fantasy of a pre-discursive, selfsame cinema whose strongest suit (its claim to indexicality, a 1:1 ratio between the filmic and pro-filmic) is usurped by digital animation is simply the "biology is destiny" argument mobilized to uphold the gender binary redefined in cinematic terms. Manovich's retrojected narrative of "the death of the Real" parallels the same prescription that genital-centric public discourse forces onto the body's constitution in order to confine it to its "indexical" relation towards its reproductive organs—perhaps fearing in a similar sense that "end of stable identity" digital animation has served as the harbinger of (Lamarre 2006, 169). However, neither gender (through the body) nor cinema (through the camera apparatus or film strip) may lay claim to an *identity that is ontologically prior to expression*, as such a move, according to Butler, would function solely as a "normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience" (Butler 1990, 23).

For Butler, temporal sedimentation births an assumed holistic "presence" in gender that obfuscates its discursive composition and hides its origins in artifice—a claim, oddly enough, Manovich recreates in reference to cinema's retrojection of its imitative past in animation (Manovich 1999, 177). His logical lapse, however, is to assume that cinema's return to artifice (through digital animation) in some roundabout fashion spells its ultimate death. Lamarre picks up on this foible by positing that Manovich's "demise of cinema" vis-à-vis the digital turn (i.e., the loss of indexicality) may paradoxically enact its very "completion or consummation" in the same fashion that "overcoming the human" was "already part of humanism" (Lamarre 2006, 169). Lamarre's undermining of Manovich's negative dialectical relationship may allow us to posit, then, that in the same way sex was "always-already gender," perhaps cinema was always-already the grounds of digital, and as such cinema and gender *can* and *should* envision a horizon continually deferred, with the former being well suited through modes of digital animation—this zero-point of originless descent—to reify the goals of the latter. In the same way that queered gender and sexuality repudiates that "old dream of symmetry" (Butler 1990, 31) in not acting in accordance with the body's *reproductive* tendencies, digital animation may be seen as circumventing the genital-centric, "bourgeois" drives birthed by the framework of indexicality, i.e., of "reproducing" reality.

As standardized, *a priori* judications tend to confine objects to limited trajectories, part of the project of imagining forms of queer embodiment in animation would necessitate a de-fetishizing of its *reproductive* tendencies and a reassertion of its *transformative* capacities. The importance of such a reformulation, as Tom Gunning points out is precisely that the "assumption that the creation of motion merely offers a simple process of reproduction" disparages "cinematic motion" as it "stresses its lack of aesthetic value by seeing it as automatic" (2014, 4). Ingrained in the mimetic insistence of institutionalized forms of 3D digital animation (the naturalist/realist aesthetic) would simply reduce cinemas polytonal palette to a tired compulsion to repeat. What is lost in this, as Pat Power suggests, are the notions of "incompleteness, imperfection, and subjectivity" that "invite interactive participation and have an expressive value that can surpass this explicitness" as the tendency to "perfect" the filmic imitation of "the Real" paradoxically emphasizes its fraudulency (2009, 109). Does this loss of "incompleteness and imperfection"—abundantly present in digital cinema's

seemingly unavoidable propensity for systematization and the “smoothing out” of all evidence of artifice—conversely seem entirely at odds with the possibility of imagining a “queered” ontology of animation precisely dependant on notions of incompleteness and imperfection?

The way to rectify this fundamental aporia, then, would not be a simple “return to origins” signified by the indexical in its rough, rugged insistence, but rather to insist on an *aleatoric* digital cinema *vivified* through an aesthetic of *experiential suffusion*. Though one may argue that the signified “presence” of the animator in indexical animation would fall closer in line with the emphasis on the “permeable and self-reflexive” that underpins many forms of queer embodiment, how long must the romanticization of the self-reflexivity provided by the presence of the animator’s hand continue until that very same insistence of presence is recognized as a requisite foetal embrace *without which* spectators would feel fundamentally dissociated? Can’t “aleatoric” modes of digital animation that actively refute aesthetic naturalism provide the spectator with an even deeper sense of self-reflexivity and formal awareness as they foster those same drives of a *decentered, originless* ontology of our contemporary gender moment? As “expressive arts need to be experienced emotionally if they are to be properly understood” (Power 2009, 113), the aleatoric aspiration for digital animation may nurture many complex affective states within the viewer that refuse a metaphysics of substance and presence—that precise sense of monadic containment, knowledge, and order nascent to the cogito that receives its affirmation in the sense of being the putative centre of its own domain. To quer the viewership experience, then, is not just to stimulate varied cortical connections, but rather to expose digital animation’s originless, nomadic, and ungrounded ontology through *explicit* and *recursive* renderings of its constitutive elements in a way that is commensurable with the goals of contemporary queer embodiment.

To solidify what is meant by the potential for digital animation to be composed in *aleatory* fashion, some practical grounding must be provided. But first, a question: is there anything formally specific to digital animation that indexical animation can’t provide in imagining queer forms of embodiment? As we might note through the concept of the *animorph* formulated by Norman Klein—i.e., the formal midpoint in “an animated cycle where metamorphosis takes place”—the sense of corporeal mutability is not exclusive to digital animation (Klein 2000, 22). Furthermore, Klein argues that the negative space opened up by “the power of erasure...those empty spots, or glitches between actions” that “may be kept blank” in the animation process creates “a sum effect, a condensed narrative about decay or loss; in other words, the loss of control, the loss of the past, the loss of representation”: indexical animation was in its own way already foregrounding a certain formal “lack” and alterity *behind* the image (24). Klein references Fleisher Studio’s oeuvre—*Betty Boop in Snow White* (1933) in particular—as the structural epitome of the *animorph*, as their works tended towards the active incorporation of the animative process into the final work itself; the caricatural “illusion of live” and formal univocity of Disney’s animations were instead eschewed for an insistent morphological play that didn’t “[hide] how animation was done” (26). In Fleisher’s film, Betty Boop is decreed the “fairest in the land” by Queen’s mirror. Jealous and resentful, the Queen orders her two guards Bimbo and Koko to behead Betty; hilarity and visual gags of primarily morphological quality ensue, with Betty Boop’s escape/orphic journey becoming a “vaudeville tour through the underworld of New York entertainment” (29). The short is consumed by a spectrum of hauntology: the “absence of plot”, the “phantom presence” of a rotoscoping that “leaves scars”; the general oneiric concatenation of imagery from the “collective imaginary” of its animators (27, 29). As such, when the embittered Queen’s thumb and forefinger morph into a guillotine, symbolizing her desire to behead Betty Boop, does this “ani-morphing” sight gag played in simple passing in this larger morphological world not already place us in the realm of awareness towards corporeal and formal performativity (28)? In other words, it would seem that the reification of substantive assertions harbour intrinsically its own repressed element—that is, indexicality seems ultimately condemned to accentuate its own “lack”, its own spectral nullity.

In this sense, we may understand the “analogue” (indexical)/digital relation as replicating the same relation queer forms of embodiment share with the signposts of the “normative”. Following Butler, “The parodic repetition of *the original*...reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the

natural and the original...Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (Butler 1990, 43). If indexical animation already presented a lapse of presence within the symbolic, then the conceptualized “aleatoric” digital aesthetic of experiential suffusion would circumscribe itself well to the ground of Judith Butler’s gender performativity in its recursive act of unveiling the ways that “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (34). As such, digital cinema can aspire to become a “lived genealogical critique” of its own modes and functional mechanisms, a simulacrum gleefully parading as its simulacral “original”: discontinuity playacting as discontinuity. Perhaps for Butler, digital animation would be drag’s technological corollary.

The aleatory, when practically applied, moves beyond levels of basal self-awareness and towards mutability as it presents a disturbed and distributed agency. Weirdcore, a London based video designer, serves as a prime example of this framework. His video work for various musicians, including IDM musician Aphex Twin, is a radical heightening of the animorphing process. His CGI-rendered “cyber architecture” from Aphex Twin’s work “T69 Collapse” (2018) presents a completely computerized world created through photogrammetry—“the practice of creating 3D images using 2D photographs” in tandem with point-clouds, sets of data points that together form a 3D shape, and ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) (Davies 2018). The associative sprawl (that *experiential suffusion*) of the video “queers” not only the normative, typically assumed viewership experience, but calls for a recognition of its own “performativity.” The 3D-rendered houses in the videos sporadically flash images of the original photos they were based upon as if the unconscious’ repressive and censorial capacities have faltered, revealing to the ego its long struck off origins that now seem non-sensical, unwanted, unnecessary—demonstrating that which was an original to have perhaps always-already been a fake. Weirdcore’s planar bricolage (Figure 1) is thus simultaneously uncanny and revelatory, as most of his images seem just about ready to spill internally and externally into their own seams. The anamorphic logic of dialectical relation (i.e., original à morphed) is heightened as the constitutive elements of reality are undone: permanent flux elides presence by making form mere formality. Weirdcore’s images attempt to imagine a positionality *outside* the symbolic. When applied to queer embodiment, this sense of a formally deferred presence falls well into line with José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) conception of “queer futurity”—queerness imagined as a futurity-bound phenomenon—as well as providing room for filmic representations of the non-binary, the non-normative forms of “bodily utopias” not yet imagined or representable. Similarly, much of what can be said of Weirdcore’s aesthetic can be supplanted onto Masaaki Yuasa and Kôji Morimoto’s film *Mindgame* (2004)—a film about a figural neuter with aspirations of becoming a comic book artist who embarks upon a hallucinatory and polytonal emotional escapade with a dyadic catalyst: a yearning for his childhood girlfriend, and his death and subsequent resurrection after an encounter with two yakuza. Though neither “T69 Collapse” nor *Mindgame* deal directly with queer embodiment, the kaleidoscopic patois of techniques in *Mindgame* continuously deconstruct



Figure 1.
The return of the spectral repressed in Weirdcore’s aleatory animation for Aphex Twin’s “T69 Collapse” (2018). Screen capture by author.

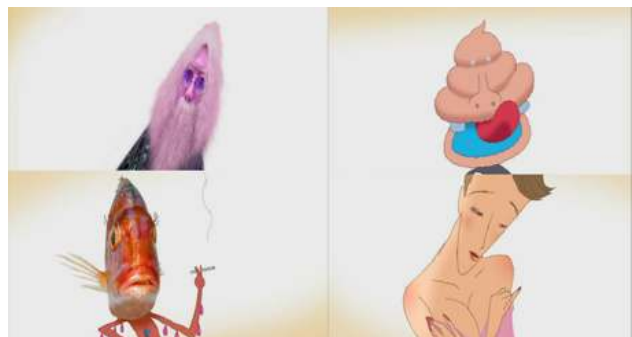


Figure 2.
The continually deferred face of God in *Mindgame* (2014). Screen capture by author.

the “indexical 2D cel animation world” by way of, for example, multicomposite photos of tigers or fish that come to briefly represent one small instantiation of the continuously evolving face of God (Figure 2)—or the morphing of an entire street from its original hand-drawn version into a “toonified,” glossy 3D-rendered version of itself. These and other “physical reassignments” of the film demarcate a disintegrating formal zone that mirrors narrative breakdowns in time and reality itself. The potential for such a form extrapolated towards forms of queer embodiment that refuses a unitary definition of the body is palpably exhaustive.

The “indexical lack” at the heart of digital animation need not fix it in perdition; its manifest “uncanniness”—the sense of a somewhat dissociated and inherent algorithmic composition (in Weirdcore’s work specifically)—may be conceived as a fault line in identity that opens up a realm of figurative “play” and transformation that diverges from a more *serious cinema’s* insistence on representation. The “non-centred centre” of digital cinema’s ontological status—if providing nothing else—serves as a useful analogy and springboard for theoretical and practical frameworks of imaging forms of queer embodiment through animation that promote aleatory (and hence liberatory) incursions into cinema.

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